A Simple Survey Volume2

source : https://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=A_Simple_Survey:Volume2

簡単なモニターです

いらっしゃいませ、アトラクションランドへ。

皆様には、この世界的に有名な遊園地で、破格の報酬を約束された『あること』にご協力いただきます。

やっていただくのは簡単なモニターです。今から皆様に試作型『アトラクション』の概要書と、イメージ映像を提供します。

そうですね。最低でも、各『アトラクション』につき改善点を三つぐらいは記入してほしいものです。無記入、無回答はなしです。

どんなに小さなものでも構いません。

それでは、これよりモニターを開始します。

か-12-41

簡単なモニターです

鎌池和馬

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鎌池和馬（かまち かずま）

身近にあるエンタメ記号シリーズその2。今回は桜です。昼と夜で随分雰囲気が変わるところが素敵。また、ライトアップと組み合わせるとやや未来っぽい印象になったりするのもポイントです。

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簡単なモニターです
ヴァルトラウテさんの婚活事情

イラスト：葛西 心（かさい しん）

雪国で絵を描いて生きています。
今回は個性的なキャラを沢山描けて楽しかったです。
今後、バニー衣装を描く時は、この作品を思いだしそうですね。

カバー／旭印刷

簡単なモニターです

鎌池和馬
イラスト／葛西心

デザイン／渡邊宏一（2725 Inc.）

ぴんぽんぱんぽーん!!
……あ、流石にボリューム大き過ぎました？　失敬失敬。
いらっしゃいませ、アトラクションランドへ!!
私達は「アトラクション」のルールと結果は厳守しますよ、
さあさあハッピーエンドまで一直線にゴー!
それじゃー始めますよー？
Attraction Land
hide and seek
and shoot!!
Bang, Bang!
5P
5P
アトラクションランドの専属バニーガール

「映像の『アトラクション』じゃ
色んな舞台が出てきてた。
ここもそんな風に、
地獄病棟そっくりに作った
建物なのかもしれない」
東川守（ひがしかわ・まもる）
「でも、他の参加者ってどこ行っちゃったの？
確か、映像を観ていた時は三〇人とか四〇人と
書いたと思うんだけど……」
松実白魚（まつみ・しらうお）
「……見た感じ、
街の明かりみたいなのは見えないな。
遠くの方にあるのは海か？」
風上信造（かざかみ・しんぞう）
レイチェル＝スカイダンス
「うう……」
氷山都茂子（ひやま・ともこ）
「そういえば、さっきから
一つだけ開かない扉があるなって」

Greeting

Welcome to Attraction Land!!

Oh, yes, yes. I know, I know. I have to give that intro, so don't look so unamused. I'm sure you all know this already, but you were brought to this world famous amusement park as employees rather than guests. In this employment ice age...actually, how many years has it been since they called it that? Well, congratulations regardless.

Unfortunately, you are not proper employees, but we can promise you much better pay than a normal corporation.

What we will be having you do is a simple monitoring.

We come up with new attractions daily, but they always have plenty of holes in the prototype phase. And there is a risk of an expert too familiar with the project overlooking something. If a child plays with park playground equipment in a way adults never thought of, it can lead to a horrible accident, right?

In the same way, we require the help of people like you who have no preconceived notions.

Now then, I will be supplying you with documents describing the attractions and some image videos. Yes, not even a prototype has been made at this point. Once we get through this stage, the construction of one can begin.

When that happens, we may call you back here. But for now, just watch the videos.

Please find any problem areas in the details of these attractions.

Tell us what must be done to ramp up the difficulty level and make them even more cruel, thrilling, and impossible to clear.

Let's see then.

We would like for you to fill out at least three points of improvement per attraction. Three. If you find more than that and put them down, you will receive a bonus for the number of additional points.

You come up with points to complain about or be dissatisfied with when you watch a movie, right? Just think about this as being paid to write them down. It's a really simple job, don't you think?

Do not leave anything blank or unanswered.

It does not matter how small a thing it is. Just fill out at least three defects or loopholes in the rules.

Now then.

Let the monitoring begin.

Attraction 01: Deadly Bullet Game

Wristwatch (40p), fish tank (15p), vase (5p), metal sheet (1500p), screw (3p), flowerpot (30p), plywood (15p) , copy paper (1p), saw (30p), rubber hose (5p), flathead screwdriver (10p), nail (1p), ballpoint pen (2p), curtain (15p), adhesive (5p), paint (15p), chewing gum (2p), leather belt (10p), hat (15p), chopsticks (3p), ring (100p), stuffed rabbit doll (5p), electric shaver (30p), cell phone (40p), insect repellant (10p), contact lens (5p), cup ramen (10p), oxygen tank (100p), disposable tissues (3p), compass (5p), styrofoam (20p), rope (10p), nail clippers (5p), light bulb (5p), file folder (3p), stroller (15p), hot towel (5p), backpack (20p), rubber band (1p), spoon (10p) , plastic plate (5p), USB memory card (30p), beer can (5p), plastic bag (1p), duct tape (10p), electric lead (15p), plastic drink bottle (5p), scissors (10p), wine glass (10p), postcard (1p), fork (5p), cold medicine (5p), laptop computer (50p).

Those items were scattered throughout a windowless room about the size of a school classroom. The other participants had likely been lead to similar rooms.

In the center of the room was something similar to the boards placed at the entrance of a restaurant with the restaurant's name written on it. However, this board contained the manual for the attraction.

Deadly Bullet Game.

Your time limit is 30 minutes.

Once that time has passed, you will be shot from a distance of 15 meters.

Please create some bulletproof equipment before the shooting event begins.

However, you may not currently use the items prepared on the stage.

The current situation is similar to being handed a can of food without a can opener. However, do not forget that you can sell an "unopened can" even without a can opener.

All of the items on the stage have a set price.

You may sell any unneeded items to earn funds with which you may purchase the items you need.

Any item you sell or have used once can never again be used in this attraction.

Any survivors after the attraction has ended will be paid 200 million yen.

"Damn you people…" I muttered without thinking, but I could hardly back out now.

I needed the money. I had to do whatever it took.

A woman dressed as a bunny girl spoke with a smile from a corner of the room.

"Will you give up then?"

"You know I can't do that. Begin! Begin the attraction!!"

"Then the 30 minutes begin. Good luck," announced the bunny girl while showing off an analog pocket watch that intentionally made a loud ticking noise.

Now then…

I would be shot from a distance of 15 meters. As a Japanese man protected by the Swords and Firearms Control Law, I did not know exactly how powerful that would be, but it still sent a chill down my spine.

There were all sorts of items scattered throughout the room, but I could not help but think of one of them first.

The metal sheet (1500p).

It was 2 meters tall, 1 meter across, and about 3 cm thick. It was likely meant to be used for construction scaffolding. It alone was probably enough to deflect a handgun bullet.

But…

"I wouldn't have enough even if I sold every other item."

When I calmly added up the points, it was obvious I could not reach 1500p. If I hadn't stopped to think and simply started selling things to buy the metal plate, it would have all been over.

But on the other hand, the plywood (15p) and fish tank (15p) would not stop a bullet.

A bullet.

I was up against a bullet.

To survive having it shot straight at me, I needed some kind of metal.

I could not reach the metal plate (1500p), but the nail clippers (5p), file folder (3p), and some other items used metal parts. I needed to gather those items until I had the same protection as the metal plate.

"If you ask me, you should divide the items between the usable ones and the unusable ones."

"Shut up. I didn't ask you."

"For example, there's the ring (100p) and wristwatch (40p). Those are useless but have a high value. I say you should go ahead and sell that sort of item."

"I told you to shut up."

If I sold the metal plate (1500p), I could buy every single other item. And both the ring (100p) and wristwatch (40p) used metal. It was dangerous to quickly sell something just because it gave a lot of points. Since she wasn't explaining that, I could assume the bunny girl wanted me dead.

"What I need to start with are the duct tape (10p) and flathead screwdriver (10p)."

"Ehh? Can you really stop a bullet with a roll of tape? And a screwdriver? Wouldn't it be even harder to deflect a bullet with the tip of that tool then how they do it with a Japanese sword in ridiculous action movies?"

That wasn't my plan.

The flathead screwdriver (10p) was to remove the metal from the other items and the duct tape (10p) was to bind it all together.

That meant I had to decide what items to take the metal from.

"I really don't understand this at all," said the bunny girl in a sweet voice that sounded like background noise

while she wiggled her hips around. “This is only for 200 million yen. 200 million. While that is a lot of money, it’s still small enough that a normal salaryman could earn it if he worked hard enough. And yet more than 20 people are risking their lives in this attraction for that much. What is going on?”

“I’m sure we all have our reasons for needing the money.”

“True, but didn’t you win 5 billion yen in the lottery? Why do you want even more money? Life sure is full of mysteries.”

“…”

People often said that you didn’t need to worry as long as you had money, but that was a lie.

No one had won the lottery in a while, so the value of the grand prize had grown to 5 billion. And when a certain someone won that grand prize, it was all over the national news. They had supposedly hidden my personal information, but that information leaked out right after I transferred the money into my bank account. I don’t know how they did it, but it seems there are loopholes that allow people to acquire that sort of information.

It may have been a mistake to accept it as a lump sum.

By midnight that night, a group of masked men broke into my house through a window.

I managed to escape with only the clothes on my back, but I found my house burned to the ground when I returned at sunrise. Naturally, my bankbook and seal were missing. The police officer who appeared to be secretly enjoying my misfortune suggested I freeze my bank account, but it was empty by the time I did. I received a confusing explanation filled with terms like " foreign banks" and "online banks", but it boiled down to the fact that there was no regaining what was lost.

And despite all this, I was still pursued by people for all sorts of reasons: inviting me into their religion, asking me to help unfortunate children, asking me to pay off their debt, begging me to buy them medicine, etc.

What I needed now was money.

I needed money to erase all information on the current "me", so I could start fresh with a new life.

"The nail clippers (5p), the electric shaver (30p), the stroller (15p), the file folder (3p)…oh, and the beer can (5p) and oxygen tank (100p), too. …I guess those are the items with usable metal parts."

"Oh? But won't the gunshot make the oxygen tank explode?"

"If I empty it first, it's just a metal tube."

That said, I wasn't a diver, so I didn't know how thick it actually was.

"Well, it doesn't matter to me. But don't forget you need funds to purchase those tools. What will you sell?"

"The metal plate (1500p)."

"Eh? Should you really do that? It looks like the thickest and safest tool to me."

"I said I'm selling it, so I'm selling it! It's the most blatantly obvious trap!!"

"Fine, fine. You could have used it in other ways than its thickness, though. For example, you might be able to

use its weight to crush the empty oxygen tank (100p) to create a flat metal plate."

No matter how many ways it could be used, I could never earn enough points to buy it.

The biggest item I had was the oxygen tank (100p). I emptied it of air and then used the duct tape to attach the other various metal parts around it.

"Now then, will that tank be thick enough? You see them explode after being shot in movies a lot."

"Shut up. You can't trust what you see in movies."

"Everything up through removing the air may have been a good idea, but…"

"?"

With a metallic click, the pocket watch in the bunny girl's hand stopped its ticking.

The 30 minute time limit was over.

The long-awaited shooting time had arrived.

The thought of that caused a great amount of sweat to soak my body. My breathing grew unbelievably shallow and fast.

I had assumed I would be led to some other room, but that was not the case.

The bunny girl reached into her cleavage and pulled out a shiny black semi-automatic handgun.

It was covered in plastic and almost looked like a toy.

But the situation changed after the smiling woman pointed the barrel upwards.

Her index finger moved.

A great noise exploded out.

It was like lightning had struck a nearby tree. I seriously thought I jumped a few centimeters from the ground. My heart hurt. Something was wrong with my pulse. I could not move a single finger, much less my head, so I looked around with only movements of my eyes.

The bunny girl continued smiling all the while.

"Now, please move back behind the tape on the floor at the end of the room. Well, you don't have to if you don 't want to, but being closer puts you at a disadvantage."

I followed her instructions, but I was driven more by that barrel with smoke wafting up from it than from a desire to participate in the attraction.

I could not rely on this handmade bulletproof item.

I started to doubt whether my plan would work.

It was handmade and based on an amateur making guesses on top of guesses rather than on actual data. My trust in it had completely crumbled upon seeing the force of that properly manufactured handgun.

No matter what I attached around it, it was still just an empty oxygen tank.

Just as the bunny girl had said, they were often detonated by bullets in action movies.

Would I be okay?

Would I really be okay?

Would the bullet really, really not shoot straight through it and kill me?

"Okay, how about we begin?"

"Wai-…"

"Bang."

In the next instant, I heard an explosive noise, my vision spun around, and my breathing literally stopped.

My chest hurt. I couldn't breathe. A pain that was unpleasant to even think about writhed throughout my body as if my blood vessels were being stretched to their limit.

My field of vision was pointed up toward the ceiling.

It took several seconds before I realized I had collapsed to the ground.

But then something else happened.

I saw the bunny girl peering down at my face.

"Hmm… Oh, you're alive. Then I guess you pass."

"…?"

"When you fell down right as I fired, I thought you were done for, but it looks like you only passed out for an instant due to the shock of the gunshot. There is no trace of the bullet passing through your impromptu bulletproof item made from that oxygen tank. Looks like you definitely pass."

I did not feel like I had survived.

I still did not feel like I was breathing.

I felt so little like I was alive that I would have believed it if someone told me I was having an out-of-body experience.

But the bunny girl had just announced my victory.

Which…

Which meant…

"I won the attraction…"

If that was the case, I had won 200 million yen. I could regain the life I had lost by having my information

leaked after winning the lottery. I could not imagine what exactly it took to completely erase my personal information, but surely I could manage it with 200 million yen.

I could finally see the light of hope.

I tried to reach my hand out toward it as I lay on my back, but then the bunny girl said something else with the same smile as always.

"Okay, that ends the *first round of the attraction*. Now let's move onto *the second round*."

……
……
……*What?*

This time, it was not my breathing that stopped; it felt like time had stopped. And yet the bunny girl did not take it back.

She did not take back what she had said.

"Oh, it's nothing hard. You don't need to learn any new rules. You just have to repeat the exact same attraction is all."

"N-no! Don't screw with me!! You said I would get 200 million yen if I won the attraction!! You explained that at the beginning!!"

"Yes, and you will get that money once you do clear the entire attraction," said the bunny girl while tilting her head in an obviously feigned look of puzzlement. " Remember the rules?"

Deadly Bullet Game.

Your time limit is 30 minutes.

Once that time has passed, you will be shot from a distance of 15 meters.

Please create some bulletproof equipment before the shooting event begins.

However, you may not currently use the items prepared on the stage.

The current situation is similar to being handed a can of food without a can opener. However, do not forget

that you can sell an "unopened can" even without a can opener.

All of the items on the stage have a set price.

You may sell any unneeded items to earn funds with which you may purchase the items you need.

Any item you sell or have used once can never again be used in this attraction.

Any survivors after the attraction has ended will be paid 200 million yen.

Any item you have used once.

Any item you have used once.

Any item you have used once.

That means…!!!!

"The attraction is meant to have multiple rounds. That is what that means. Oh, but it would be boring to just repeat the exact same thing, so the caliber of the gun

gradually rises. Round one was a 38 caliber, round two is a 45 caliber, and round three…well, by that point a handgun isn't big enough."

"Round…three? How many rounds does this attraction have!?"

"I have no obligation to tell you that. But you can assume it has at least three."

People could remain happy while faced with something unreasonable by rejecting it as unreasonable and escaping from reality.

But they would eventually realize that would not work forever.

For me, that moment came when I heard the ticking.

At some point, the pocket watch in the bunny girl's hand had begun moving once more.

The time limit.

The next time limit was approaching.

That was when it happened.

I finally felt as if a cold wind was blowing through that hot room.

The problem I had to think about first and foremost was…

“Wait. Wait!!”

“What is it?”

“I just used everything I thought I could use for a bulletproof item. I can’t do anything for a second round!! ”

“I see. Then you’re in quite a bind.”

It was obvious what her smile meant.

She knew.

She knew from the beginning this would happen!!

“Why you…!!”

Blood rushed to my head, but the feeling disappeared a moment later.

I saw a dark hole.

It was the 45 caliber barrel of the gun that would be used in the next round.

It was clearly larger than the previous one.

It was obviously more powerful.

“You have 24 minutes and a few seconds left,” announced the bunny girl while still smiling.

She knew I could not do it.

“I will fire the same as before once the time comes, so do your best to create a solid shield.”

Someone spoke within a dark room somewhere.

“What do you think?”

“You still don’t get it? He sold the metal sheet (1500p), so he can buy all the other items.”

“Will that help him?”

"If he realizes he can stop a bullet by filling the fish tank with water or piling all the paper up, he might be able turn this around."

"But it seems he is completely focused on the metal due to the guidance of the 'employee' we dispatched."

"That's what she is supposed to do. Playing a thankless role can be hard."

"So will he be able to last through all 10 rounds?"

"He's going to have a tough time of it. But there is no easy way of getting rich quick."

Attraction 02: Hide-and-Seek Gamble

"Before beginning the attraction, please answer the question on this form. Two teams of five will play hide-and-seek with a time limit of 30 minutes. If all of the hiders are found, the seekers win. If even one hider is not found, the hiders win. Under these conditions, which team do you think will win?"

I felt the most important factor in hide-and-seek was the size and complexity of the stage, but no description was given of that. However, I had always been good at hiding. For that reason, I filled in the circle for "the hiders" without thinking too much about it.

Thinking back, I should have realized sooner that the attraction had already begun at that point.

I was blindfolded, loaded into the back of a truck of a shipping company called Direct Transportation, and taken somewhere.

When the blindfold was removed, I first saw the brown, rusty wreckage of a giant Ferris wheel.

The sounds of crows carrying on hurt my ears.

"Okay, okay, okay. Let's get this attraction started!" said a bunny girl in a bright voice while standing amid a bunch of tough-looking men in plain work uniforms. " Everyone, pay close attention to the armbands on your right arm. Red means you are a seeker and blue means you are a hider. Okay, split into your groups now."

I had a blue armband on my right arm.

That meant I was a hider.

We lined up as per the bunny girl's instructions. The hiders with the blue armbands made up a group of two men and three women while the seekers with red armbands made up a group of four men and one woman.

The bunny girl quickly continued her explanation in a cheerful voice.

"Now, the seekers are Tanaka Masuo-san, Satou Tadakage-san, Inoue Kyouko-san, Kinoshita Shizuyuki-san, and Kawamo Ryuujin-san. The hiders are Yamada Megumi-san, Akaumi Hatsuko-san, Hasebe Kensuke-san, Tobukuro Jirou-san, and…oh, we have two Tanaka-sans. This one is Tanaka Mitsu-san. Those are the ten participants in this attraction."

That explanation did not actually explain who anyone was.

And the bunny girl did not seem to care.

We could work together or struggle individually for all she cared.

"The hide-and-seek stage is everything within this amusement park's grounds. The seekers will be given cheap digital cameras. Any hiders photographed with them will be considered captured. We will determine what is valid. The hiders are free to change locations as long as they have not been captured. But if moving gets them caught, that defeats the entire purpose."

"…"

"The seekers will wait here while the hiders are given 30 minutes to hide. The seekers will use the 30 minutes after that to seek. Will they find everyone within the time limit, or will at least one escape? That will decide the victors of this attraction, so do your best"

The high-pitched sound of a whistle rang out.

It came from the one in the bunny girl's small mouth.

I was a hider, so I ran off on my own just as I had been instructed. Unlike with the seekers, there was little merit for the hiders to gather in one place. If any one of us survived, we would win, so our odds were better if we were as far apart as possible.

"Now then…"

The most prominent feature of the neglected and worn down amusement park was the Ferris wheel, but my gaze also stopped on the roller coaster rails that cut across the grounds. In addition to the attraction facilities like the haunted house and freefall was a section with some restaurants and a large shopping mall for souvenirs .

Since we were playing hide-and-seek, I needed to enter some kind of building.

The first decision I had to make was…

"Should I stay in one place or move around a lot?"

If I was planning to stay in one place without moving, I needed to slip into some place to which it was unlikely anyone else would come. For example, a tunnel for the

roller coaster. A place like that was normally off limits due to the danger, but it would be safe while the roller coaster was not running.

But if I slipped into somewhere tricky like that, I would be unable to monitor the situation and it would be difficult to escape if I was about to be found. It was an all or nothing gamble.

If I was planning to move around, I would need to hide somewhere that constantly had plenty of exits. That would allow me to sneak out if I was about to be found. But that sort of area would also be easier for the seekers to enter, so I had a greater risk of being found.

Both options had their advantages and disadvantages.

As I was trying to decide which plan to go with, a voice called out to me from behind.

"Hey. Hey you!"

"?"

I turned around to find a girl of about college age approaching.

"You have a blue armband, so you're a hider too, right ? I'm Yamada. Who are you?"

"Hasebe," I replied.

"Hasebe, hm? You aren't thinking of hiding somewhere tricky, are you? Y'know, like climbing up to the top of the freefall's supporting pillar, so they can't see you from below."

"Would that be a problem?"

I had not decided what to do yet, but I decided to keep the conversation going.

Yamada-san frowned and said, "Weren't you listening to the rules? The seekers just have to snap a photo of us to capture us. Even if you escape to where they can't reach you, a single flash of the camera and you're done for."

Now that you mention it…

When I thought further about the digital cameras, another problem hit me.

"Then won't we be at a huge disadvantage if one of the seekers climbs up somewhere high so they can photo all across the park?"

"Of course. Oh, right, right. Have you checked your watch?"

"?"

"C'mon, that's one of the most basic precautions. The hiders hide during the first 30 minutes and the seekers seek during the next 30 minutes. But what if one of the seekers blows a false whistle? They can just photograph any hiders who carelessly come out."

That was something else I had not realized until she pointed it out.

But given the reward for this attraction, the odds were good they would try some sort of malicious trick.

The winners would be given 200 million yen each.

The entire losing team would be executed. I did not know how exactly that would be done, but I doubted they would just take our lives quickly and painlessly.

After all, they had gone to the trouble of luring us in with all that money.

This attraction would lead either to heaven or hell.

"The whistle was blown at exactly 4:30. Make sure to use that time as your basis. I'm a hider too, so I want as many survivors as possible."

This was a cruel attraction with human lives on the line, but it at least had a clear distinction between friend and foe. If our team won, each individual member was rewarded, so none of us had any reason to betray each other.

"I'll be going then. Let's try not to get caught."

I watched Yamada-san's back as she ran off toward the shopping mall, but I finally recalled I had no time to spare.

The hiders earned little from working together, but the seekers earned a lot by working together.

For example, if one of them climbed up to an elevated position to watch over the amusement park, he could cover almost the entire outdoors area. If the other seekers

then searched through the haunted house and other buildings, they could easily find most of the hiders.

The indoor areas were restricted spaces.

No matter where you hid, you would be found if every nook and cranny of the building was searched.

It was possible the remaining four seekers would not be able to search all of the indoor areas within the half hour time limit, but it was too dangerous to rely on an assumption.

If I lost, I would be killed.

No, even if I had never taken part in this attraction, my ruin would have come before long without the prize money.

I had no other options.

If I did not win here, it was all over.

I would do whatever it took to win. And all of the participants, both seeker and hider, likely felt the same.

I would never win if I looked at this as a normal game of hide-and-seek.

I needed a sneakier, sure-fire method that would ensure I would not be found.

"…Wait."

If I did not enter a building, I would be spotted by the lookout from an elevated area.

If I hid indoors, I would likely be found as they thoroughly searched all of the buildings.

But…

What if there was a third option that was neither indoors nor outdoors?

The 30 minutes came to an end.

A distant whistle signaled the end of the hiding time.

Several sets of rushing footsteps could be heard immediately afterwards.

At least one of the seekers would likely be headed for an elevated location to act as a lookout.

Given my hiding spot, my vision was severely restricted. The biggest problem with an elaborate hiding spot was the lack of information on one's surroundings. I had no way of peering down on the complicated terrain from above like in a movie or video game.

And on top of that, it was hard to breathe.

Each time I exhaled, more lukewarm air built up. I began to wonder if I would simply suffocate here.

"Gyah!! Wait, don't take a picture!!"

"I've found a hider! I think her name was Akaumi. Hey, stop that. Don't grab at it!!"

"I just received word that someone ran toward the haunted house!"

"That stupid lookout! Why didn't he take a picture!? Then we would have had them!!"

My field of vision was so limited that I had almost no idea what was happening, but I could tell just from the conversations that the attraction was accelerating. My heart began racing unpleasantly fast and I started to wonder if the sound of my heartbeat would give me away.

But I would be fine.

I had to be.

The seekers were searching based on the idea that the lookout covered outdoors and everyone else searched indoors. They would never find my third option for a hiding spot.

After all…

I was inside an old, dirty mascot costume lying on the ground.

You could say I was hiding outdoors.

However, the seeker acting as a lookout over the entire amusement park from an elevated location could not tell if someone was hiding within a mascot costume lying on the ground. It was possible someone might get too close and hear me breathing, but the other seekers assumed all of the hiders were indoors.

And so they would not do a thorough search of this area.

They would rush to the buildings to search them as thoroughly as possible. They did not want to leave a building unsearched before time ran out.

I had just one job.

I did not need to backflip out of the way of spotlights or keep objects between me and a moving enemy like in a spy action thriller.

I simply had to remain motionless.

I had to lie on the ground without moving a muscle.

But when failure meant death, doing nothing for 30 minutes was easier said than done. In fact, my sense of time had long since been thrown out of order. I would

likely have gone insane inside that mascot costume had I not had my watch's alarm set to tell me when the game was over."

The costume was located near the old shopping mall.

That left me near a building if it looked like I would be found out.

I was sure this was the correct answer.

There was a risk of the seekers claiming the costume was a type of clothing and therefore a picture of it would qualify, but I was still safer than if I was running around the amusement park.

Or so I thought.

One's surroundings would sometimes change the situation considerably.

Someone suddenly kicked at the head of the costume.

I almost cried out, but frantically held back.

This game of hide-and-seek was a team match. If a single hider remained after the attraction ended, we

would all win. So all hope was not lost if I was captured. However, I had no idea how many hiders were left.

And…

I was sick of having my life controlled by others.

I desperately tried to determine whether someone had accidentally tripped over the costume or if they were checking to see if someone was inside. But regardless of the answer, what I had to do was remain perfectly still.

Either way, it was all over if they realized someone was inside.

Please continue on.

Please leave.

As I desperately prayed, something unexpected happened.

"…Hasebe-kun?"

I heard a familiar voice. It belonged to Yamada-san, a fellow hider.

I had no obligation to respond and the hiders gained little by working together, but it would all be over if one of the seekers saw us. I spoke quietly while remaining motionless to make sure the seeker acting as a lookout would not notice.

"Yes, it's me."

"Good. You haven't been found yet."

"What about you, Yamada-san? Do you know about the others?"

In this attraction, the hiders had no reason to betray each other. That was why I spoke to her, but then something seemed off.

That's right.

She might have known someone was hiding inside the costume due to a slight movement or the sound of breathing, but how had she known it was me?

It was almost as if she had seen what had happened to every other hider.

It can't be…

My throat grew dry.

The situation continued on nonetheless.

It can't be!!

And then Yamada-san, who was supposedly a hider, shouted out as loud as she could manage.

"There's a hider over heeeerrrrrrrreeeeeeee!!!!!!"

Her announcement made no sense.

But it greatly influenced the attraction regardless.

I stood up without bothering to remove the mascot costume and ran toward the shopping mall. The lookout might have gotten a picture, but I did not hear anyone announce they had gotten me.

But it was only a matter of time.

Where was I supposed to hide now? The shopping mall was large, but the area inside the building was still limited. If the four seekers not acting as the lookout thoroughly searched the building, they would eventually find me.

And…

Yamada-san casually walked into the mall and spoke with a grin.

"It's no use. You and I are the only hiders left. We will be found here and it will all be over."

In this attraction, the hiders gained nothing by betraying each other.

If the team lost, Yamada-san would be killed too.

But…

What if that assumption was not actually true?

"We were asked a question at the very beginning. We were asked whether the seekers or the hiders would win. I thought the teams were decided based on that, but…"

"But the attraction would not work if more people chose one side, right?"

I had no idea how they had chosen the teams when it had not come out to 5 and 5. Perhaps they had drawn lots.

What mattered was that Yamada-san had answered that the seekers would win.

And if the gamble was based on which side you had predicted would win rather than which team you were on…

Then there could easily be someone like Yamada-san on the hider team that wanted the seekers to win.

"Kh!!"

I stripped off the useless mascot costume and frantically looked down at my watch. It showed 15 minutes left until the alarm went off. I could never escape the seekers for that long just by running at random.

Even if the shopping mall was large, its design was very simple in order to make the space look even larger. In other words, I would be found quickly no matter where I hid. The giant fish tank in the entrance was filled with muddy water, but I could never hold my breath long enough to hide inside it.

"I don't know how they're going to kill you, but I promise to laugh my ass off while watching it happen."

"…"

Whether I remained indoors or escaped outdoors, I would be found.

The seekers had already constructed that system.

I needed to find a spot the seekers would not try to search just like the mascot costume from before.

I needed a mental blind spot.

I had only one hope of victory.

And the seekers found me not long after entering the shopping mall.

I had hid inside a trashcan, but they made sure to check inside it. I may have made sure they focused on small areas like that when they found I had been hiding in that costume.

I could not remember their names, but I was photographed by two salaryman-like men from the seeker team. Then one of the organizers in work uniforms led me to the front entrance of the amusement park.

The other hiders were gathered there.

One girl had blood flowing from a split lip. She may have tried to steal the digital camera from a seeker.

After staring at a pocket watch for a while, the bunny girl finally brought a silver whistle to her lips and produced a high-pitched tone that covered the entire park.

The sound was filled with despair.

The hiders and the seekers. That whistle announced a great prize for one team and death for the other.

The bunny girl smiled and said, “Now then, I think the outcome is obvious, but it is time for the official announcement.” Her voice spread out through the area. It seemed to continue on forever. “Four of the hiders

have been captured. *Yamada Megumi-san is still unaccounted for.* One of the hiders has survived, so the winner of this attraction is the hider team"

All strength seemed to leave my body.

"Heh."

And then a smile slipped out onto my face.

But this was not the sort of smile you would find in a child's picture diary.

This was the smile of a man who had thrown someone else under the bus.

But I had won.

I had won.

"Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha

The other hiders had no idea what had happened, but their tension seemed to have melted away as well. They were all strangers, but they started embracing each other with tears in their eyes. I even had a stranger hug me and kiss me on the cheek. I was disappointed to look up and find it was a man.

Meanwhile, the seeker team was much less thrilled.

"How? How!? What do you mean you couldn't find Yamada of all people in the end!? I thought she bet on the side of the seekers!"

"Was her cooperation all a giant bluff? No, she gained nothing from it. She's still hiding somewhere now. If she had somewhere that safe, she could have just hidden there without bothering with the bluff!"

No matter what anyone said, the attraction was over.

The outcome had been decided.

I would be given my prize of 200 million yen. I could escape my dead end of a life. As I felt that hit home, the bunny girl spoke to me.

"Congratulations."

"Could you kiss me on the cheek? I just had a horrible experience."

"Here you go."

"In the West, this is a form of greeting!!"

After that moment of pure bliss, the bunny girl asked me a question.

"By the way, I get the feeling you are the one that holds the key to this attraction. Do you mind if I ask what actually happened?"

"I don't mind as long as I know the result of this attraction is set in stone. Can you guarantee that nothing will overturn the result and my prize money will not be taken from me?"

"I guarantee it. Now, I would like to know where Yamada Megumi-san is."

"Okay."

That was simple.

Yamada-san had bet the seekers would win, but she was in the position of a hider. That meant we would win if she was not found up to the very end. That was why I had done what I had done.

Yes.

There was a place the seekers would never search.

A place that I could never hide in myself.

“She’s in the muddy fish tank in the shopping mall. I put some makeshift weights in her clothes so she would sink to the bottom.”

The rules never said anything about the hiders having to be alive by the end.

Attraction 03: Bang, Bang, Bang!!

I was truly a pathetic person.

When I succeeded in something, I would naively assume I could succeed the next time too. Even if I was in the middle of possibly the most crucial competition of my life, I would forget the risks of failure and assume I would be fine.

When I did that repeatedly, it was only natural that I would fall through a pitfall.

And then the only way to crawl back out was with a once-in-a-lifetime gamble.

I had believed I would succeed because I had succeeded before.

But that was not how life worked.

No one remained on an upward path forever. Nor was anyone set on a path of never-ending failure.

However…

That did not mean I was naïve enough to think everyone had the same amount of luck.

"Pant, pant…"

I was on the grounds of an abandoned factory on the coast.

I held a handgun with a single bullet loaded.

Five people in similar circumstances had been gathered and a bunny girl had given simple instructions after providing us each with a handgun.

"Kill everyone else. The last surviving person will be given a new identity and a path to escape to a happy new country."

The rules were so simple that there was no room for interpretation.

Everyone gathered here wished for a new world to live in in order to escape loan sharks or gangs or something similar.

"This has got to be a joke," a fat boy had said as he stared down the barrel of his own gun.

In the next instant, he had blown out his right eye and collapsed to the ground. No one wanted to touch the disturbing corpse.

The handguns were real.

The attraction was real.

Anyone would panic when thrown into a situation like this, but I recovered from the shock relatively quickly. I had experienced this sort of cruel game several times before. And I had always believed I would survive somehow or another. That was why I had already prepared myself by the time I detected that characteristic scent. From here on, the rules we had learned from our parents and at school would no longer apply.

That said…

This would still be the first time I had actually killed someone with my own hands.

"This is no different. The losers were just killed where I couldn't see them before."

Once we had understood the rules, it was obvious we first needed to go hide. Without exchanging a word, the other three remaining participants and I had scattered throughout the abandoned factory, leaving the fat boy's corpse lying in the starlight.

The biggest problems were the handguns we each possessed and the single bullet in each one.

We each had the power to kill a single enemy in a direct confrontation. But using that trump card would inform everyone else of our location in the form of a gunshot. …And it would also inform them we had used our only bullet.

No other information could be more useful to any participants who still had their bullet.

But on the other hand, killing the other participants without using the gun would be difficult. The enemy only had one bullet, so it would be over for them if you could make them miss. However, could we really make that gamble? If we were hit anywhere on our body, it

was game over. Even if it was not a fatal blow, we would be injured too much to move much. The enemy could then finish us off with a metal pipe or something.

I did not want to use my gun.

The others did not want to use their guns.

Unless there were any other idiots who ended up shooting themselves in the head, every other participant would have reached this same mental stalemate.

I had three enemies to deal with.

I had a single bullet.

It was a powerful weapon, but it alone was not reliable enough to survive to the end of the attraction. If I simply tried to shoot my way to the end, I would hit a dead end.

"What am I supposed to do?" I muttered without thinking.

People's lives were filled with waves. The moments of success and the moments of failure were alternatively mixed together. That was my theory. It was important to have a moment of success prepared when it truly

mattered. I wanted to use up a moment of failure on something unimportant ahead of time in order to prepare success for when it mattered. It was similar to diminishing losses by knowing when to fold in a game of poker.

According to that reasoning, the worst thing to do was to stop thinking. That would just get you repelled by the swirling "luck" of both varieties and lead to a horrible fate.

Now then.

I wanted a starting point for my first action.

I needed something that would put me a step above the others.

I knew I had to use my gun to win, but was there a way to use it besides shooting someone?

"…Wait," I muttered as I checked on my surroundings from behind a pillar.

I could see the fat boy's corpse from where I was.

It was a bit dangerous because he was in an open area, but it looked doable.

Two gunshots rang through the night within the abandoned factory.

People are shooting at each other?

Myself included, there were four remaining participants. I had heard two gunshots, so either two of them had run across each other or the third participant had led them into a conflict.

If I was lucky, the two had killed each other, but if I wasn't, they might both have survived. The third participant and myself had the two remaining bullets. If both shooters had survived, that meant I would need to use something other than a gun to kill the last person.

"…Not good."

Had I used up my "successful turn" when I saw the fat boy's corpse and came up with my idea? I had not intended to make a real gamble yet at that point.

A possible need to kill someone without a gun had arisen.

I was all for gender equality, but as a woman, I was unsure if my slender arms would be up to the task.

I wanted to believe the two shooters had killed each other.

If that was the case, I simply needed to kill the final participant with my bullet.

"I guess I need to check on the situation."

I was most afraid of not knowing whether they were alive or not. If I did not check for myself how many had survived, I could not come up with a proper strategy.

I pulled a small bag out of my pocket, took a candy out of it, and tossed the candy into my mouth. This was a superstition of mine. It was soda flavored. That was my favorite flavor of the different colored candies, but I grimaced.

Why am I using up my success here?

I had hoped to use up a failing turn on something insignificant just before this important gamble.

I slowly walked through the weeds as I moved along a wall in the abandoned factory grounds. Sweat oozed from the hand holding the handgun. I had only one bullet. I understood what an overwhelming advantage that bullet was, but it was all over if I missed. Could I really gain the full value of that single bullet?

While still hiding behind the crumbling outer wall, I peered into the factory that was missing any equipment.

I could see someone inside.

The building was too dark to see whether it was a man or woman, but it was definitely a participant in this attraction.

Was this one of the two shooters?

Or was this the third participant who did not take part in that shootout?

The answer to that would tell me whether the person had a bullet in their gun or not. My movements naturally grew more cautious. And then…

I heard a rustling from the side.

"…!?"

I immediately turned in the direction of the noise and found a middle-aged participant aiming his gun at me. And the figure within the abandoned factory frantically aimed their gun at me after hearing the same noise.

…Both of them?

I had heard two gunshots. That should have meant only one other person had a bullet left.

It was possible one of them was bluffing, but if that was not the case…

(Were those two gunshots a decoy!?)

One of the other participants might have recorded the sound of the fat boy shooting himself at the beginning. They may have originally been intending to record the bunny girl's promise regarding the reward, though.

At any rate, they had used that.

No one had used their gun.

Which meant…

"Not good…!!"

I had nowhere to hide. I frantically tried to leap to the side but did not make it in time.

I heard a much deeper sound than before and a dark red hole opened in my right side.

"Gah!?"

This was a horrible failing turn…!!

I did not have time to fire back. I could not stop my momentum of trying to escape, so I collapsed onto the grass-covered ground. The middle-aged man then took the gun from my hand.

"Don't think badly of me. I just used up my bullet, so I need to get a new-…"

The man's words were suddenly cut off.

They were replaced by a gunshot.

I had just shot the man in the middle of the chest with another handgun in my hand.

"Bh….bh…?"

"You're holding the gun that belonged to that fat guy who killed himself. That's why I didn't move it over into this hand."

I had intended to pretend to give up at some point and shoot my opponent when they let their guard down, but the situation had advanced too quickly.

The moments of success and moments of failure continued to intertwine.

"….Uuh…"

With a look of shock frozen on his face, the man collapsed backwards.

I doubted he could be saved at this point, but at least he was able to look up at the stars as he died.

"Gh… Dammit…"

But some problems remained. I had used my gun. The fat man and the middle-aged man's guns were out of ammo too. But I knew at least one other participant who knew I was here was inside the abandoned factory. And the final participant was still unaccounted for.

"And I definitely have a failing turn coming up. This is bad."

I could not use any of the guns.

Or could I?

There had been two gunshots. Three handguns lay on the ground.

It was too soon to give up. The other participants did not know the details of the situation, so could I trick them into thinking one of the guns was still loaded?

Two enemies remained with actual loaded guns and I had only one empty gun to use as a bluff.

"Heh…"

I pulled a candy out of the small bag in my pocket.

I placed it on my tongue and tasted mint. I hated mint.

I grimaced at the flavor, but still smiled.

That was a good omen.

I had used up my failing turn. I would surely be successful next.

And after a few more gunshots rang out and a few more people died, the attraction reached its conclusion.

The bunny girl gave a carefree announcement.

"Okay, the attraction is over."

A single figure sat up in the center of the abandoned factory grounds.

It was the chubby boy who had thought the attraction was a joke, peered into his own handgun's barrel, and shot himself in the right eye.

He held his right eye that was visibly red and wet even in the starlight.

"Oh? If it's over, does that mean the other four all killed each other? Then do I get my ticket to a new life?"

"You do. To be honest, the others were much more fun to watch. I feel like giving them an award for effort."

"But the winner is the last one alive, right? It doesn't matter how many people I killed."

"True." The bunny girl stared into the dark red hole where the chubby boy's right eye had been. "But I can't believe you did that as a bluff."

"I needed a safe way out of the deadlock between the five of us. One eye seems a fair price to pay."

When the boy had been given his handgun, he had taken out the cartridge and replaced the bullet with some paper while the other participants were focused on a map of the area. He had created what was known as a blank. But even a blank created enough of a blast to easily crush an eyeball when fired at the face from close range. The paper used in place of the lead would have been perfectly harmless at a distance of a few meters, but it was dangerous enough at a distance of a few centimeters.

"By the way, what were you planning to do if someone tried to check the body?"

"I was just banking on that not happening. I panicked a bit when that pretty woman came to get my gun."

Intermission 1

"Eh? …What is this?"

"I thought this was going to be things like roller coasters and freefall rides."

"These are the attractions?"

"Maybe these are indoor attractions. Y'know, a horror ride using 3D video."

"The bunny is pretty great."

"I thought Attraction Land was supposed to be a world of dreams and magic? Why are these new attractions so grotesque?"

"Weren't they bought out by a movie distribution company recently? Maybe the horror stuff is related to them."

"Those organs sure were real looking. Was that CG or special makeup?"

"They might have just used pig or cow organs."

"That bunny is so moe."

"So when these are made, are the guests supposed to play these games with each other?"

"I could see this causing actual fights."

"The park staff would probably act as the dealers and NPCs."

"…Eh? So the staff would have to wear that bunny suit ?"

"Who is it that won't shut up about the bunny?"

(The intermission will soon come to an end. Please continue helping us with this monitoring. If you have not been filling out your form for any reason, please begin soon.)

Attraction 04: Sudden Death Old Maid

Old maid.

That term referring to an older unmarried woman may not mean anything to someone from Japan at first glance, but it sounds a lot more familiar when referred to with the Japanese term baba-nuki.

When you think about the English meaning, the rules of the game seem a bit cruel, don't they?

I was sitting at a table playing an altered version of old maid.

It was a one-on-one game.

Each player had half of a 52 card deck handed to them. Then each player was given 26 jokers for a total of 52 cards each.

Both players shuffled their deck just once to complete their preparations.

Player A could freely choose cards from any part of his deck, but he could only display two cards at once. Player B would take one of those two cards.

The card taken would be counted and the other card would be discarded without being shown to Player B.

Each player would take turns in this process until all cards had been taken or discarded. The player with fewer jokers in the end would be the winner.

The winner would be given money based on the number of jokers the loser took and the loser would gain a debt of the same amount.

If a player was caught cheating, he would be given the same debt as the maximum of 26 jokers. However, the cheater had to be caught in the act. If a player claimed the other was cheating yet no evidence of cheating could be found, he would take on that maximum debt instead.

"…"

I had just added the 26 jokers to my deck and shuffled it.

On the other side of the round table from me was a blond youth covered in accessories who looked like he

had everything a salaryman like me did not. He shuffled his cards as well and even stylishly placed them on one edge of the table.

The youth grinned and said, “You look out of place here. Do you know where you are? Each joker is worth 10 million yen.”

“And you are trying too hard to look good.”

“You don’t look like the kind of person for this attraction.”

“Neither do you. You don’t look like the kind of person who would screw up badly enough to need to take part in this.”

In a way, my victory was already assured from the moment I took part in this Sudden Death Old Maid.

My family had already escaped to a country with a low cost of living. They may have thought it was just an overseas trip, but I had no intention of having them come back if I lost this attraction.

I had heard the large sums of money changing hands in this attraction were handled by Spider Finances which

was well known in the black market. But they would only be able to get their hands on me.

They might be able to take my organs, but they would not reach my family.

If I won, I would acquire the money I needed and if I lost, I would lose everything, but my family would be saved either way.

That was my definition of victory.

"Okay, okay. Let's get this game of Sudden Death Old Maid started," cut in a smiling bunny girl who appeared to be the same age as my daughter. "Have you decided on a strategy? Are you picturing victory in your mind? Have you prayed to god? Well, it's time to begin either way. It takes so long to get through everyone with these one-on-one attractions."

The youth and I each grabbed one of the two cards the bunny girl held out.

I had the ace of spades.

The youth had the king of spades.

"Morita-san, you got the ace, so you go first."

"…"

Going first or last did not provide any real advantage.

Even if the youth managed to give me all 26 jokers, the game would end in a draw if I managed to give him all 26 jokers as well.

"C'mon, let's do this, old man. Choose."

With a grin on his face, the youth took two cards from his deck and held them out towards me. I had no way of knowing which was a joker just by looking at the backs. It was possible both were jokers or neither were jokers.

After some hesitation, I grabbed the card to the right from my perspective.

"Joker. That's 10 million for me."

The youth's smile grew deeper.

"Morita-san, your count is now one," said the bunny girl.

It was too soon to say whether I was doing well or poorly. Drawing a single joker was not enough to say anything about my situation.

For example, what if both cards had been jokers?

In that case, I would have drawn a joker no matter which card I chose. If the youth repeated that process, it would seem I had no chance of winning.

But that was not the case.

The joker I did not choose would be discarded. And we both had 52 cards. If the youth used up all his jokers early, he would pay for it later. He would be forced to present me with two normal cards for the second half of the game.

“It’s my turn. Hurry up and draw your two cards, old man.”

“Fine, fine,” I said while taking the two cards on top of my deck.

I held them out towards the youth.

The most efficient way of doing damage was to have him choose between a joker and a normal card. That way , I could have him take a joker without having to discard one. That allowed the maximum of 26 jokers to be taken.

But…

"Saaaaaaaaaaafe! Two of spades."

I clenched my teeth and discarded the now unusable joker.

Yes. If your opponent chose the normal card, the joker would no longer be usable. This strategy made the maximum of 26 jokers possible, but it also made the minimum of 0 jokers possible.

Given the rules, which was the better strategy?

Should I always use two jokers to ensure my opponent took 13 jokers?

Or should I use the jokers one at a time to make the maximum of 26 jokers possible? I only needed the 100 million from 10 jokers to fix my ruined life, but…

"Hurry up and choose, old man."

"…"

I hesitated.

My hand moved right, left, left, and right. I finally grabbed the card on the left from my perspective.

It was another joker.

With the same result as before, I could not tell what my opponent's strategy was.

Was he using two jokers? Or was he using only one at a time, but I kept choosing it?

And…

If I was choosing the single joker, was it a matter of luck or was there more to it?

In other words, could he be cheating?

"Morita-saaan. Hurry up, hurry up" said the bunny girl.

"That's right, old man. Worrying about it isn't going to help. Just draw your cards."

I took the top two cards from my deck.

This time it was two jokers.

The blond youth of course chose a joker, but he showed no sign of worry.

His expression only said that this was exactly what he had expected to happen.

"Old man, I can see what kind of life you've lived in these cards." The youth pulled out two cards from the middle of his deck and held them out. "You are a fairly honest person. Fairly. You aren't a perfect saint or anything. You normally use idealism in any theoretical arguments, but you sweat bullets and desperately search for a way out when it really matters. And those irregular actions always cause even more problems for your life."

He brought the two cards even closer to emphasize his words.

It was only a difference of a few centimeters, but it felt like an invisible wall was pressing against my heart.

"You shouldn't do things you aren't suited for. This is like a salaryman in a suit trying to play baseball against the pros. If you're gonna use those ways out, you need to have the experience."

I took one of the two cards.

Another joker.

Nothing had changed.

I had too little information.

I could not tell what his strategy was, so I had no strategy to take myself.

"Your turn, Morita-san," urged the smiling bunny girl.

I was worried.

Worried that the youth was cheating.

Of the many forms of gambling, cards were one of the easiest to cheat with. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say more methods of cheating had been developed

because of its widespread use. It may have been similar to why OSs and browsers used worldwide had more viruses.

There were a lot of different forms of cheating, but they could all be divided into two basic categories.

The first was preparing new cards to use in a trick. You could add five or six aces of spades or prepare a card that was the same on both sides. These methods were extremely effective and did not require much skill, but the risk of being found out was high.

The second was a trick that did not involve new tools. These were about pure technique. Examples included appearing to shuffle the deck while not shuffling at all and accurately pulling out the 30th card from a deck of 52 cards. These required a high level of skill, but the risk of being found out was almost nonexistent. After all, they left behind no physical evidence.

This game would decide the outcome of people's lives.

Not many people would leave that up to luck.

Anyone who was driven to the point of needing to take part in this attraction would already know they had no luck at all.

"Go ahead."

"God, you're slow. Okay, nine of hearts."

The youth did not hesitate to choose his card. He did not appear nervous. He avoided the joker as if he already knew what he would draw.

Not a single muscle in his body appeared tense as he took two cards from his deck.

"C'mon, choose. Of course, you're just gonna get a joker."

"…"

The attraction reached its midpoint.

We had each taken 13 cards from the other.

"Oh, dear. You aren't doing too well, Morita-san."

"No, he's not. Choosing 13 jokers in a row just isn't normal."

"…"

It was not normal at all.

I knew that perfectly well.

Just as the youth had said, I had taken 13 jokers. On the other hand, the youth had only taken 3 jokers from me. And those were only from the times I had given him two jokers to choose from, so I could tell something was going on.

But what exactly was he doing?

I could not stop him from cheating unless I caught him in the act. If I accused him of cheating when he had not done anything, I would take on the maximum of 26 jokers as punishment. I could not grab the youth's hand just because it seemed obvious he was doing "something ".

And I had already wasted 13 jokers.

We each had 26 jokers total. At this rate, it would only be a matter of time before it was impossible for me to make a comeback. Once that happened, the youth would no longer need to cheat. He would only need to grab two random cards to use them up.

The youth had no idea how many jokers I had left.

That was why he had not announced his victory. But the gap was simply too large. Normally, there was no realistic way for me to win at this point.

But on the other hand…

That did not mean I had to accept my defeat.

"Old man, hurry it up."

"Wait just a second."

"Thinking isn't gonna help you."

I could cheat.

If I entered the same territory as that youth, I could still win.

However…

If the youth could cheat this well, he would notice if I made a poor attempt at it. If I was found out, I would receive the maximum debt of 260 million yen. I had no idea what the youth was doing to cheat, but he had to believe he had no chance of losing this attraction. If the situation started to go badly for him, he would immediately grow suspicious.

Should I try it anyway?

Should I cheat?

Should I try to deceive someone who was clearly more skilled than me?

"…"

I had done a bit of research into methods of cheating with playing cards. I knew a few methods I could use in this situation. But I had only practiced them a bit on my own. I was not used to using them in such a crucial moment.

Should I do it? Could I do it?

"If you hesitate, you'll die, old man," said the youth with a grin. "Think of it like cooking. When you slice up cabbage, you don't make each slice after measuring out the exact number of millimeters. You get a rhythm going and chop chop chop chop chop. If you can't do that, you' ll cut your fingers."

He had seen straight through my hesitation.

He knew what options were running through my head .

And yet I still had not figured out how he was avoiding my jokers and forcing his own onto me.

I could see no marks on the cards or small tools to peek with, and yet the youth had complete control over all the jokers in this attraction.

He had to be using some kind of trick rather than playing fairly, but I could do nothing if I did not know the details.

What should I do?

What should I do?

What should I do?

"…"

I let out a small sigh.

I made up my mind.

Simply continuing the attraction would simply open the gap between us further. I would never win that way. If I was going to turn this around, I could not rely on the normal methods. So I had to do it. The youth would of course be on the lookout for any cheating, but my situation would gradually grow worse if I could not slip past his defenses.

"Okay. Here goes."

"Hurry it up."

I had not noticed it until now, but my fingertips were trembling. I was sweating. Would I be gradually cornered or would I earn the maximum prize in one go? We were both facing our deaths, but I very clearly felt my life coming to an end.

I reached a hand toward my deck.

The youth narrowed his eyes.

I was going to do it.

I was going to cheat.

If the youth reached out and grabbed my right wrist, it would all be over. I would be faced with the maximum debt.

The bottom of my index finger touched the card on top of the deck.

I grabbed two cards.

And I drew them.

"H-here."

"Old man, you thought about trying something, didn't you?"

The youth grinned.

I was sweating so much I thought my cheap suit had to be discolored.

"But you backed out at the last second. You made some suspicious movements, but they were a bluff. That was not enough to give you any advantage."

I glanced over at the bunny girl. She was smiling as always.

Meanwhile, the youth reached out his hand.

He grabbed one of the two cards.

He took the card that was not a joker.

"It's over, old man. You can't win now."

He grabbed the card between his thumb and forefinger .

I opened my eyes wide.

I held my breath.

I fought the dizziness I felt from anxiety.

If I was going to do it…

It had to be now.

"Wait."

I used my other hand to grab the youth's arm before he could pull it back with the card.

The contents of his hand fell to the table.

Those contents were two cards.

Yes, two cards that had been placed directly on top of each other.

"He's cheating. Bunny girl, you be the judge."

"What!? Wait, what the hell are you saying!? I didn't do anything!!"

"Hmm?" The bunny girl tilted her head in feigned confusion. "Now, why are there three cards here where there should only be two?"

"How should-…!?"

"Because this youth brought in a third card," I quickly cut in so he could not say anything unnecessary.

I suppressed his speech.

As the youth's mouth opened and closed wordlessly, the bunny girl continued speaking.

"Okay, what does he gain with this third card?"

"He had the card he wanted ready in his sleeve. When he took the card from my hand, he would swap it with the one up his sleeve. That way he could swap out a joker for a normal card."

"Bullshit!! I didn't do that! Look, there isn't a single card in my sleeve. If I was winning that way, I would need to have a bunch of cards hidden somewhere!!"

"*…It does not matter if you have been using this method up until now or not.*"

"What?"

"The rules say you take on the maximum of 26 jokers if you are caught cheating. It does not matter if it is your 1st time or 100th time."

"That's true," chimed in the bunny girl.

"G-give it a rest. This is bullshit!! Old man, you just grabbed my arm!! You had a card hidden in your palm

and you just dropped it at the same time as the card in my hand. That's what happened!!"

"Perhaps." I did not force a denial. "*But it means nothing if you do not catch me in the act.*"

It was the same as the cheating he had done.

And my turn was already over. We could not go back to cheating from the past.

He had noticed my hand make a suspicious movement , but had decided I gave up partway through. That had been his chance, but he wasted it.

The youth and I looked over at the bunny girl who was watching us from close by.

However, the look in his eyes was very different from the look in my eyes.

With a cruel smile, the girl simply said, "I explained in the beginning what would happen to you if you cheat."

"W-wait… It was this old man who cheated!! I didn't do-…!!"

"Oh, so are you saying she can judge cheating from the past now? I'm fine with that. But then I think she will find you are clearly the first one to have cheated."

"Sorry, but I cannot accept any changes to the rules," said the bunny girl.

"And there you have it."

I grinned and dropped the single card remaining in my hand onto the table.

It pictured a clown mocking someone.

It was a joker.

"Did you think I would do something so reckless without making sure I had every angle covered?"

The struggling youth was dragged away by several men in work uniforms. I wondered if I should think too much about what was to become of him. I decided it was not worth it. No one would take part in this attraction for fun or on a whim. He must have had a pressing reason to risk his life here.

"Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"That was well thought out."

"I could not come up with any other way of fighting back."

"Hmm."

The bunny girl seemed to be enjoying herself.

She may have been interested in seeing the sight of two people wearing each other's souls down in the attraction. Perhaps that enjoyment remained even now that the winner and loser had been decided.

"So does that mean…"

"That I know how he was cheating? Of course I don't. If I knew what he was doing, all I needed to do was grab his arm then."

"I thought maybe you figured it out after the fact since he did it so many times."

"Then I would have grabbed his arm the next time he tried it."

"I see."

"…So was this method against the rules?"

"No, no. If it had been, we wouldn't have removed that youth."

That meant I would safely earn my prize money and be reunited with my family. I still needed to be on my guard in case a gang of thieves attacked just outside the facility, though. It wasn't over until I made it home. I had ended up having to take part in this sort of attraction because I tended not to see things through to the end like that.

"Oh, right," said the bunny girl.

"What?"

"Do you want me to tell you how he was cheating? It will bother you if you leave without finding out, right?"

She had a point.

But…

"No, the attraction is over, so it doesn't matter. That would be like drinking a flat soda."

Attraction 05: Loser Resurrection Game

I had always thought I would be the one to torment others as I saw fit.

I had never even considered the possibility I would be on the receiving end.

And yet I had always been a step away from being both.

First, draw lots to form pairs.

You may use whatever method you like, but one member of the pair must die.

Afterwards, the other member must resuscitate them. If successful your previous losses will be forgiven.

If you fail, the surviving member of the pair will be killed.

We were gathered in a large area that might have been a supermarket or a shopping mall.

It had no windows which was not uncommon for such buildings. I could not tell if it was day or night. The relatively small number of people made it abundantly clear how large the area was.

After all, there were only 30 people in an area that could easily hold hundreds.

"…You've gotta be kidding me." I squeezed out those words after reading the rules written on a board. My voice soon rose to a shout. "You've gotta be kidding me. You've gotta be kidding me! You've gotta be kidding me! ! What kind of rules are these!? One of us must die? Then we have to revive them? That isn't something you can just do so easily!!"

"But those are the rules," explained a smiling bunny girl.

Dammit.

I'm supposed to be the one in your position!!

"And this is not a normal attraction. All of you have *already lost once*, right? The normal course of action would simply be to kill you. You are meant to die and yet we are giving you a chance to make a comeback from that loss. …In that case, isn't it only fair to have you start by coming back after dying once?"

That was some messed up logic.

But they had the power to force it on us.

I felt fear as I watched what I had always hoped for from the position I had never hoped for.

I had no choice but to do it.

This was not my place. To make sure everyone knew that and to reach the place I was meant for, I had to think through this like a winner. The instant I grew timid, I would die. I would fail. I was barely hanging on now, but I would fall even lower.

"Red." I pulled a stick out of a cylinder the bunny girl held out and spoke the color painted on the end. "Red! Who else got red!?"

Those who had drawn other colors looked around amongst themselves. I was in a group of 15 and another group of 15 stood a short distance away. It seemed the other group was drawing lots just like we were.

A small woman in her twenties timidly raised a hand when she heard me shouting.

Her outfit was incredibly plain.

There were plenty of ways to meet failure in your life, but she did not seem the type to charge toward a gamble on her own. There was only one reason someone like that ended up falling this low: someone else had kicked her down on their way up.

I could tell just by looking at her.

Losers would think and act under the assumption that they would lose.

They would claim to be doing their best, but that was just an escape.

What they actually meant was that they did not care if they lost so long as they did their best.

"…Tch."

She was not a reliable partner for a literally life-or-death gamble, but there was nothing I could do to change that.

One of us had to die and the other had to resuscitate them.

We would be literally resurrecting from our loss. To meet the requirements of the rules, at least two people were needed.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"H-Hashinaka. What about you?"

"Kishikawa. But your name isn't what I want to know. What did you do before ending up here? Anything that might be useful for this game?"

"I was…um… a nurse."

This plain woman who called herself Hashinaka glanced somewhere else.

I looked over to see the smiling bunny girl waving her hand. At her feet were countless AED sets. Those electric shock-producing medical devices that could be found in subway stations and hotels were contained in bright fluorescent colored bags.

"Do you know how to work one of those?" I asked Hashinaka.

"Y-yes."

"So do you know what death would be easy to resurrect someone from!?"

"Not as much as a doctor would…"

Had I actually lucked out?

This seemed a lot better than a pair where neither knew anything of use.

"U-um, what about you?"

"You could say I'm unemployed," I said quickly.

My specialty was collecting on debts. To put it simply, I worked for a loan shark. When those perverts found a new toy, it was my job to efficiently bring them to ruin. The name of Spider Finances was well known in the darker corners of society.

But telling her that would not help matters.

It was pathetic people like her I had made my prey. I saw no advantage in telling her more than necessary.

Winners only needed to think about winning.

Thinking about what would happen if you lost or what you needed to do in order to not lose was the beginning of losing your nerve. It was proof that the entrance to your doom had begun to open.

I could not allow myself to lower the purity.

I was a winner.

"To get straight to the point, I want to know what the safest way to die is. I know that sounds stupid, but you

know what I mean. The AED will have instructions, but they won't say anything about how to die. What type of death is that electric shock used for?"

"U-um… uh…well…"

"Please, just answer. My knowledge isn't gonna help here. You're the only one that knows how to resuscitate someone. That makes it obvious who needs to die and who needs to do the saving, right?"

"Kishikawa-san…"

"It's simple division of labor. But I need you to tell me how to die. So please tell me, nurse. The AED, the defibrillator, the electric shock, or whatever you want to call it. What is the ideal type of death to use it on?"

"B-but…just using the AED does not ensure you can resuscitate someone. You cannot decide that division of labor so-…"

"Come on now."

I cut her off in irritation.

Losers really would always be losers. They just did not understand what was important.

"Listen up. Let me make this very clear. There are winners and losers in life. Which side you are on is determined from birth. A winner can drop down to being a loser, but the opposite is impossible. Do you get what I' m saying?"

"B-but…then why…?"

Was she asking why I was here?

Or was she asking why anyone would make any attempt in a game made up of losers?

She was too naïve.

"Those great reversals you occasionally hear about are not actually reversals. That is when someone who was originally a winner has ended up a loser due to some kind of mistake. It is only natural that they win and it is only natural they end up back in their rightful spot. That winner's greatest enemy in that time is cowardice. He is only temporarily in the spot of a loser, but he will truly become a loser if he ever begins to doubt his rightful spot

. That is the biggest reason why winners become unable to win."

"…"

"So do not think about what happens if you lose or if you fail. Thinking like that will leave you an ugly duckling forever. If you want to be a winner, you need to remember what it is like to win. There is no other way to win."

"But…"

"I don't know how much you have lost in your life. But you drew the lot that paired you with me. That person is no simple loser. People lose because they think they will lose. Their cowardice trips them up. Is that what has happened to you? Are you going to keep doing what has always led to failure in the past?"

"Wait a second," said Hashinaka.

She took a few shallow breaths.

And then she answered.

"An AED is a device meant to restart a stopped heart. In other words, it cannot help with anything else. Stimulating the heart will not help resuscitate someone with a destroyed organ or extreme blood loss."

"Come to think of it, you don't really picture people being given electric shocks after being stabbed or shot."

"But even so…A death that causes a lot of damage to the chest would be a bad idea. You cannot give CPR to a patient with broken ribs."

Hashinaka let out a groan as she called up all of her knowledge.

She knew she was needed.

Fortunately, she was not the type to get ecstatic over that fact.

"You usually see CPR being used on people involved in water accidents, right?" I said.

That was a death due to lack of oxygen.

In other words, suffocation.

The quickest method to pull that off would be…

"So hanging?"

"N-no! I do not think you should do that."

"?"

"Most people do not die of suffocation when they hang themselves. Their entire weight is placed on their neck, so they usually die from a broken neck or a lack of blood to the brain. Neither of those can be resuscitated using the AED."

"Then what about strangling by hand?"

"Y-you want me to do that…?" said Hashinaka with tears in her eyes.

We had only just met, so she obviously did not care about me personally.

She simply did not want to become a murderer even if she was going to resuscitate me.

But this was obviously no situation for that kind of thinking.

"Would it work?"

"It depends, but it might be difficult. It would all be over if the neck broke in the process of constricting the throat."

"That leaves…actual drowning, I guess. Would a method using water be good?"

"That would prevent breathing while not putting a burden on the rest of the body."

The bunny girl had said we were free to use anything within the large store. Other than food, it also contained simple furniture, appliances, and tools.

There were industrial refrigerators, tool sets, stainless steel knives, metal bats, vacuum cleaners, water servers, bathtubs, microwave ovens, handheld game systems, bread makers, wardrobes, desks, electric guitars, wall clocks, dryers, laptop computers, lamps, extension cords, and more.

We could use any one of them to kill our partner or resuscitate them.

Nothing was off limits.

I called over the bunny girl.

“Hey, we need that bathtub.”

“Have at it”

“You’ll provide us with water, right?”

“As long as you don’t mind a cold bath.”

The preparations took only about 15 minutes.

The other participants cautiously watched us from a distance. Their pathetic thought process was probably to use us as an experiment to learn how to succeed.

A bathtub filled to the brim with water lay before me.

I breathed in and then breathed out.

This was hardly the first time the organizers behind the bunny girl had shown their cruel tastes, but this attraction made me especially aware of what a human life was. If only I could have been one of the ones smiling as they watched on from a safe place.

"K-Kishikawa-san. Um, Kishikawa-san."

"What?"

"A-are you really going to do this?"

"It's the only way to survive this."

"B-but…" Nurse Hashinaka looked at the full bathtub. "Can you really kill yourself in that? This is not like a deep reservoir. You can easily raise your head above water once it gets painful. And even if you put weights in your clothes, it would be difficult to create a situation where you cannot bring up your head."

"That's true."

So that's what she's worried about.

I kept my face as expressionless as possible as I grabbed Nurse Hashinaka's arms.

"*You don't need to worry about that.*"

"Eh? Um…Kishikawa-san? Um…"

She looked puzzled, but she would catch on eventually .

I wanted to get it over with before she did.

"It would be hard to drown oneself here. But that just means we need to use some other method. Like having someone else hold your arms back like this and shoving your head underwater."

"Wait…you don't mean…"

As Hashinaka stood in that awkward position, she finally figured something out. With an expression that could have been crying or smiling, she tried to force her head around to look me in the face.

I ignored her and said, "Remember what I said? I'm mostly unemployed, so *I need your knowledge to win this attraction. But only the knowledge.*" Once I had gotten that knowledge out of her, I needed nothing else. "Winners win because they know they will win. I simply needed the materials to pull it off."

I had received the nurse's relevant advice, so now I shoved the struggling victim into the bathtub.

The AED came with instructions.

It was made so normal people could use it.

So as long as I knew the ideal way to kill her, I could do the rest on my own.

And…

The smiling bunny girl looked own at her pocket watch and made an announcement.

“Ten minutes until the time limit!”

“Shit…”

I held the electrodes for the AED in my hands. Each hand held an electrode on the end of a winding cable similar to that of a landline phone.

The device was made to save lives.

It was made to start a stopped heart.

And yet…

"Shit, shit, shit!! What is going on!? I'm doing exactly what the instructions say!!"

Hashinaka lay soaking wet on the ground and her eyes would not open.

They would not open.

And if she was not resuscitated, I would lose the right to eliminate my loss!

The bunny girl answered my question in a tone that made it sound obvious.

"This kind of resuscitation doesn't always work."

"But!! That's why I asked her for the ideal method!! I am a winner. I gathered everything I needed to win! I can 't have messed up. I did everything right!!"

"Well, even in an ideal condition, the resuscitation isn' t a sure thing. But more importantly, Kishikawa-san, you have been reading the instruction while also using the AED. Are you absolutely sure you have been using it correctly?"

"Wha-…?"

"Oh, the instructions haven't been altered, so don't worry about that. But can a medical amateur like you really understand all the intricacies of using the device? Also," added the bunny girl. "Kishikawa-san, did you know the odds of a successful resuscitation drop considerably as time passes? Might you have spent too much time reading all that small writing?"

"Ah…"

"You really should have left it up to the professional nurse. Come to think of it, why was it you were fired by Spider Finances? Didn't you interfere with a colleague's mark in your haste to get promoted and ended up putting too much pressure on the mark so he committed suicide?"

"Aaaaaahhhhhhhhh!!
Aaaaa

"She's already dead."

The sound of the pocket watch stopped. She then patted me on the shoulder. It felt like some kind of sign.

And she whispered in my ear.

"*And so are you.*"

Attraction 06: Grand Slam Homer

It may sound like bragging, but I was the type who could do anything I set my mind to.

My batting average was .31. I could bat right handed and left handed which was an excellent way of putting pressure on the opposing team's pitcher.

But baseball was a team game.

Some idiots who were sulking over being kept on the bench went on a drunken rampage and cost us the chance to compete in a national competition. If it had not been for that, I would have had the perfect chance to be scouted by the pros.

Do you think I should have accepted the discipline and waited for next year?

I thought the same thing at first.

But I ran out of patience when one of those second string idiots laughed and said the following:

"Heh heh. Don't get your hopes up. I'll cause trouble to fuck up your chances next year too. And as many

years after that as it takes. Seeing you clenching your teeth like that makes me feel so refreshed."

I beat him again and again with a metal bet.

It turns out hitting a human head does not ring out in the same way as hitting a ball.

I had thought there was nothing inside that head of his , but I was wrong about that.

So how does over 50 strikes all across his body sound to you?

To be honest, I don't think that was enough. I always regretted stopping there.

"Okay, let's get this attraction started."

I was in a domed stadium.

A bunny girl stood on the pitcher's mound.

If I had been the person I used to be, I might have run at her swinging my bat when I saw that amateur standing there not wearing cleats.

"We will be using this!" The bunny girl lightly tapped a large machine next to her. "Tah dah! It's a pitching machine. It's one of the latest models. Its straight fastball can reach a maximum of 180 kph and it can also pitch curveballs, forkballs, sinkers, and sliders."

"…"

"It will pitch 10 balls. If you can manage at least one homerun, you will clear the attraction. As a prize, you will gain the right to take part in a public non-professional baseball tournament. You can do your best there to catch the eyes of scouts from 12 baseball teams."

A power hitter made up for all of his mistakes in a single hit.

Even if he swung two strikes in a row and got foul after foul afterwards, he would become a hero if he hit a single homerun.

That was the case here too.

Of course, such a wonderful opportunity did not come without its risks.

After all, I was a person the police should have been pursuing.

"If you fail all 10 times, your right elbow and left knee will be shattered with a hammer. Without anesthesia of course. But we usually kill people, so that almost sounds like a joke."

"Just out of curiosity, why are you not going with that usual punishment?"

"Because this is more fun," said the bunny girl with a smile.

She had wonderfully cruel taste.

With a metal bat in hand, I stepped into the right-handed batter's box.

My life as a baseball player was riding on this attraction.

But my life would have been over if I had not agreed to this. I just wanted this one last game. I didn't care how shady it seemed; I wanted to throw my life away into a serious game that wore at my very spirit.

"This is the newly constructed People Dome that even pros would love to play in. What is it like to stand on this stage of your dreams?"

"I'll stand here for a more legit reason someday. And I will get there without anyone else's help."

The distance to the outfield seats was about 100 meters on either side and 115 meters down the center.

This was a domed stadium, so I did not need to worry about the wind.

The bunny girl had said the pitching machine was one of the latest models and could manage several types of pitches, but I was not particularly worried about that.

Pitching machines had a characteristic weakness.

What I needed to watch out for most was…

"Oh, if the pitch misses the strike zone making it a ball , that pitch does not count. So feel free to let it go."

"Yes, but I don't want that thing to hit me with the ball again and again."

"How about this? If the pitching machine hits you three times in a row, I will pitch instead. …But don't try to make it hit you, okay?"

The subsequent mechanical noise was louder than I had expected.

I could tell a baseball was being loaded into the pitching machine's tube.

A thick roller on either side of the small ball provided it with tremendous kinetic energy and it shot out with amazing speed.

Ah…!!!???

I heard a sharp noise.

I did my best to swing the bat with all my strength along the path of the ball, but a horrible pain ran through my wrists. Instead of flying forward, the ball soared diagonally backwards into the net behind me.

"Okay, Pitch 1 was a failure."

"Gh…"

The bunny girl had not used some special trick to alter the timing of the pitch.

It had been a straight fastball at the machine's top speed.

180 kph.

That pure feat of strength created a force no human pitcher could easily replicate. Even in the Major League, a pitcher who could throw 160 kph was thought to have an excellent arm. She had seen straight through me. And so easily.

"Wow. You actually managed to hit the ball at the 180 kph setting. The ball did pop up a bit due to the output being too high, though. You might not have even grazed it otherwise."

"…"

"Oh? Is the genius athlete getting worried?"

"…No."

I smiled. It was small, but I could still smile.

I opened and closed my stinging palms a few times and then squeezed on the bat's grip once more.

"That makes a good reference point to start from."

I did not need to panic. No matter how many times I failed, it would be a success if I hit the very last pitch.

The optimum pitch.

Every pitch before that was nothing more than preparation for that one. Even with a full count of three balls and two strikes, the final pitch could change everything. And that first pitch had been a good lesson in that way.

"Okay, time for the second pitch. Get ready, get ready."

The smiling bunny girl pressed a few buttons to send instructions to the pitching machine. With a mechanical noise, the "neck" that shot out the ball rotated around.

This would be a different sort of pitch.

The pitching machine was the type that shot the ball using two high speed rollers. And some pitches gave the ball spin to make it curve.

In other words…

The quickest way to mechanically implement those different types of pitches was to alter the locations of those two rollers. That was why the “neck” portion could move.

And so…

Unlike a real pitcher, I could easily tell what kind of pitch was coming!

“A forkball!?”

The ball moved too quickly to follow it visually after it was fired.

I lowered my aim based on my observation of the pitching machine, dug my cleats into the ground, and rotated my hips. I paid careful attention to the shifting of

my weight as I began to control the path of the bat. I pictured the semicircle path of the bat and the curving path of the ball intersecting.

A powerful impact ran through my hands holding the metal bat.

This was a solid hit.

I continued the swing.

After a slight delay, the characteristic sound of a metal bat rang out with a higher pitch than a bell.

The ball flew in a large arc.

The ball curved a bit towards third base, but not enough to worry about it being foul.

Out of habit, I let go of the bat and began running toward first base, but then I recalled I was in the middle of a homerun gamble.

Would this be it?

Would it make it?

No!!

"Ahh. Too bad. That made it to the 85 meter line. Just fifteen meters more!! Fifteen more meters and it would have been a homerun!!"

"…"

Whether it was 15 meters or 1.5 millimeters, a ball that did not make it into the outfield seats was meaningless.

But I had gotten the hang of it.

As long as it was not another ridiculous straight fastball, I could handle these specs.

I had eight pitches left.

I can win this!!

But despite my optimism, I failed 5 pitches in a row after that.

"Dammit…"

But not because I had needlessly tried and failed to hit pitch after pitch that was outside the strike zone. Nor was it because the bunny girl cruelly sent five straight fastballs in a row.

I accurately hit all five pitches.

I hit them solidly with the metal bat. I hit them with the end of the bat to provide the maximum amount of kinetic energy.

It had all gone as perfectly as I could have hoped.

Except…

"Oh, dear. The 90 meter line again. Just a bit more power and you would have reached the outfield seats at 100 meters."

"You…"

I had thought the same at first.

But after so many failures in a row, it was obvious something was up.

I lightly swung the bat around in my right hand.

Its weight and hardness seemed about right. It was possible something had been altered inside it, but I found it unlikely. I would have noticed something like that while holding and swinging it.

Which meant…

"You did something to the balls, didn't you!? You've made them softer and more shock absorbent than a regulation high school baseball!!"

In both professional baseball and high school baseball, what counted as a "regulation" ball gradually changed as the rules changed. One change to the materials in the ball could alter a player's batting average.

But the bunny girl smiled and tilted her head.

"Oh? I do not remember anyone saying anything about using regulation balls. In fact, if we were following all the rules, this pitching machine would be out of the question. You also would not get 10 chances."

"…"

"If you want to give up, feel free. But that will count as a forfeit. Your life as a baseball player will be at an end."

Dammit.

Either way, this opportunity was my only option.

I had no choice but to play under this bunny girl's rules. I doubted there was any way I could succeed, but I had to find some loophole to overturn that assumption.

Was there anything I could use?

I needed a homerun to win the bunny girl's game.

But I could not reach the 100 meter line at the outfield seats with those balls.

I needed something to overturn that fact.

If I simply tried to hit the balls fired by the pitching machine normally, I would never overcome that wall. I needed some way to earn a homerun without using that 100 meter line. Was there a wonderful loophole in the rules like that?

I went over my score with the previous pitches. I went over the paths taken by the balls I had hit. No ball was wasted in baseball. The result of every individual pitch

built up to create the overall flow of the game. Vast amounts of information were hidden within that. I could not give up yet. I had to solve this. No information could be more useful to a batter.

"…Wait."

I looked straight up.

There was something.

This environment gave me something.

This was not just a theoretical situation that only existed in the rules. I had heard about professional players doing it in the past which resulted in fights with the umpire.

"Well? Will you give up?"

"No."

I looked forward once more to glare at the bunny girl on the pitcher's mound. I pointed the tip of my metal bat towards her.

I thrust it out toward her.

Even an elementary school student would know what that sign meant. I had given my sign.

"I'll continue."

"Excellent."

I had three pitches left.

I was completely changing my methods from before. Would I have time to readjust with only three pitches?

The eighth pitch came.

It was an inside corner curveball that very nearly scraped against my upper body. This threw off my timing. I frantically swung the bat, but did not make it in time.

The ball was knocked upwards, grazed right by the domed stadium's ceiling, and then fell directly behind me.

"That was a stereotypical catcher fly."

"…"

Could I do it?

From a distance standpoint, this should be easier, but it seemed the equation was not that simple.

But I could not hesitate.

I had already changed my tactics.

I had to give everything I had to succeeding this way!

“Here goes.”

The ninth pitch.

It was a slider. I got the timing right this time. The trick was to hit it by scooping up from below. The solid sound of the bat hitting the ball rang out and the ball arced high into the air.

I had one chance left.

One chance!!

"Hmm. It looks like that's your limit," said the bunny girl in a fairly disappointed tone of voice. "You aren't even hitting it into the outfield now. Did you get so nervous you fell into a slump?"

"…"

"It doesn't matter to me. Okay, let's decide this with that wonderful straight fastball!!"

You are a horrible person!!

I dug my cleats into the ground. I rotated my hips. I gathered all of my strength into moving the end of the bat.

The ball was coming.

This was my final chance.

This was my ticket.

Observing the angle of the pitching machine told me what kind of pitch it would be and on what course the

ball would take, so I would not miss. As long as I had the power needed to overcome the overwhelming force of 180 kph, I would make it.

And…

The metal bat collided with the white ball.

A solid sound rang out.

The ball veered far from the ideal course toward the outfield seats. It flew up and up and up.

The bunny girl needlessly placed a hand over her eyes as she looked up toward the ceiling.

"Oh, dear. Looks like you failed again."

"Don't be so sure."

"…?"

The bunny girl looked at me in slight puzzlement, but then her confusion grew even further.

This was the final pitch.

The ball had not flown toward the outfield seats, yet my expression showed no hint of despair.

I had no reason to despair.

I had succeeded in the very, very end, dammit.

“It isn’t coming down,” I said.

“Eh? Oh… You don’t mean!!”

“What happens if a ball does not come down? I believe there is a special rule for domed stadiums. It explains what happens if a ball strikes the light fixtures or gets stuck in the framework. This is People Dome, right? What does the stadium’s rulebook say?”

Even just barely along the foul line on either side, the distance to the outfield seats was 100 meters. However, the highest point of the dome’s ceiling was only about 50 meters up. The change from horizontal to vertical made a difference, but the ceiling was the better target as far as distance was concerned.

And more importantly…

Power hitters (especially foreign ones) hit the dome ceiling fairly frequently.

"So that means…Eh? You're kidding…"

"That's a homerun. I win."

Intermission 2

"It's all so grotesque!"

"Uuh… I know these are just image videos, but it's still making me sick."

"I'm less disturbed by the videos themselves than by how many of them there are."

"And that bunny just smiles no matter what."

"Who is it that started eating a sandwich in the middle of all this? The whole place stinks of mayonnaise."

"…Huh? Is it that time already?"

"Entertainment made with foreign investments sure is amazing. I can't tell how much is real and how much is CG. A lot of movies are like that these days, though."

"Maybe it's all CG."

"Maybe it's all real."

"When these attractions are officially released, will they really be for all ages? They'll have to tone them down a lot, won't they?"

"This got a lot less exciting when I saw someone I know in one of the videos. I didn't know he worked here. "

(The intermission will soon come to an end. Please continue helping us with this monitoring. If you have not been filling out your form for any reason, please begin soon.)

Attraction 07: Memory Game

In my opinion, no one truly has nothing.

However, what they have may not be useful in society or help them earn money. It was naïve to think one would be praised for mastering something no matter what it was.

If you could name every single train station, would that help you in a job?

If you had memorized the phone numbers of dozens of acquaintances, would that give you a topic to start a conversation with a girl?

"This attraction will test your memory."

That was why I was so surprised when the bunny girl said that.

It would finally be useful.

I was sitting in a chair within a small room. A large monitor stood before me. The bunny girl used a hand to fiddle with the star-shaped earring in her right ear while using the other hand to operate a remote control.

"Okay, watch this footage. But you only have 5 seconds!"

The footage was a white screen with animal silhouettes scattered around it.

The silhouettes' colors were divided between the types of animals.

My eyes followed the animals as they moved around the screen like a cheap screensaver and the 5 seconds soon came to an end.

But that was fine.

I remembered it.

"Two red giraffes, three blue rabbits, two yellow crows , seven green dolphins, and one purple camel."

"Wow," said the bunny girl in mock surprise. "Okay, time for the question."

"Hurry it up."

"Give your answer over there!!"

I did not have time to be confused.

The chair suddenly rotated 180 degrees. At some point , the wall of the small room had opened up revealing a long straight passageway. It was about 50 meters long. An obvious large button like the ones from quiz games could be seen at the end.

But…

While the passageway was straight, several barriers of metal bars were set up along the way. They had doors on them, but I doubted they would open if I pushed or pulled on them.

Those doors all had large plates to the side.

“If you answer some simple quiz questions, the doors will open. Do your best to answer them all and then press the button at the end. Then we can begin the memory game!”

“Crap…”

Crap!!

I frantically stood up and ran down the passageway. I could tell there were five barriers of metal bars in total. I reached the first one.

The large plate next to it said the following:

"Question 1. Please calculate (32 + 45) x 19 / 3 x 0 x (99 - 11) in your head."

This has nothing to do with the red giraffes or blue rabbits!!

I started sweating when I saw that completely unrelated question. As I followed the formula with my eyes, I felt like the previous information was slipping out of my head. Calling those scattered numbers into my mind was mixing up the numbers of the different types of animals.

I knew it was a trap, but I could not reach the real memory game without answering this.

I quickly read through the question and tried to think through each number one at a time, but then I noticed something.

x 0.

"Dammit!! The answer is zero!!"

I entered that single digit into a calculator like device.

An overly complex and gimmicky mechanism loudly unlocked the door. Every action took longer than necessary and I could only assume it was meant to wear away at my memory.

I had four barriers left.

I ran to the next question.

"Question 2. A dog runs at 30 kph, a cat runs at 40 kph , a horse runs at 100 kph, and a hyena runs at 80 kph. After 45 minutes, how much distance will there be between the animal in 2nd place and the animal in 3rd place?"

Now it's animals and numbers!!

I gritted my teeth at this question that was nothing short of intentionally cruel.

If I did not answer it quickly, I felt like I would forget the footage on the monitor, but losing myself in the question would also blur my memory.

But I had to do it.

I shuddered as I thought about what they would do to me if I failed this attraction.

I had been a child with no redeeming features.

That should have been enough.

But I suddenly gathered attention for having a better memory than most people. I enjoyed being praised by others, so I worked hard at it. When I was able to name all of the stops along a nearby railroad, a new look appeared in my parents' eyes.

It seemed someone had suggested I appear on TV.

They were expecting something of me.

But I knew that my talent was nothing more than remembering the names of train stations. If something was expected of me in the public eye, their expectations would pile up higher and higher until the vaulting box was piled up too high for me to clear it. I would mess up.

I knew I would. I was heading down the rails that led to destruction. But everyone around me expected so much from me. That became such a great force that I could not back out on my own.

And I failed in the end.

When I was lined up with prodigies such as a violinist with perfect pitch, it was obvious what would happen.

I was meat to be pecked at under the spotlight.

From the moment the camera began rolling, I understand what my true role was.

I was meant to round out the numbers.

I was a foil.

I was an unimportant character meant to make the hero look cool.

"Question 5!! The final barrier!!"

I used my finger to directly write on the touch panel and the door unlocked. I squeezed through the slowly opening door to get to the end of the passageway as quickly as possible.

I was sick and tired of being lifted up by others where I would inevitably fall.

After I did not live up to my parents' expectations, they wanted nothing to do with me. It was not until much later that I learned the word "neglect". At the time, I thought it was the natural response to what I had done. Thanks to that, I completely ignored my education and did not even graduate elementary school. I only had enough knowledge to barely manage addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division.

But I would live on.

I would manage on my own.

I would not simply rot away in a dark room forgotten by all. I would use what I had to find my way through this vast world. This was the first step toward that.

But I needed a "guarantee".

Without the support of my family, I could not even rent an apartment without that. It seemed the bunny girl could help me with that. I did not know if they would give me a fake identity or use some other person, but if I cleared this attraction, they would provide me a convenient guarantor.

And so…

After slipping past all of the barriers, I slammed my palm against the large button on the back wall.

A ridiculous sounding electronic tone played.

“Okay then, it’s time for the memory game!!” said the bunny girl’s voice from a speaker on the wall.

I thought back to the footage I had been shown on the monitor.

Did I still remember it?

Would I be okay?

“…I can do this.”

I remembered it.

I remembered the types of animals.

I remembered their colors.

I remembered their numbers.

I could answer it all accurately. I would be fine. I could answer any question she asked. I could manage. I could overcome this. I would win this attraction, gain the " guarantee" I needed, and construct the foothold for my battle against this world.

"Time for the question," said the bunny girl.

This question would literally influence my destiny.

"What shape was the earring in my ear? And was it in my right ear or my left ear?

I stopped breathing.

"…What?"

No animals, no types of animals, no colors, no numbers…

It has nothing to do with any of it?

The monitor itself had been a bluff. The bunny girl may have shown me the footage directly after saying this would be a memory game, but she had never said anything about the question being related to the footage.

"You have 10 seconds."

Why was the bunny girl giving instructions through a speaker rather than appearing herself?

I understood why painfully well.

My face…no, my entire body became soaked with an unpleasant sweat and then a deadly announcement reached my ears.

"Now, give your answer!!"

Attraction 08: Washing Away Blood with Blood

The island that acted as our stage seemed to be sinking into the ocean that appeared to absorb the darkness of the night.

It was known as Corpse Island.

The entire island had been developed as a coal mine a few decades ago, but it had been entirely abandoned as time went on. The high-rise housing complexes that were not made to withstand earthquakes had not been blown up or demolished, so they had grown old and damaged until they collapsed. The exposed rebar and emergency staircases that ended halfway up showed just how unsafe the place was.

The place felt more like ruins than a deserted island.

No shouts or screams would reach anyone and the ocean surrounding the island prevented any escape.

It was perfect for being an attraction's stage.

A bunny girl holding a cheap megaphone in one hand spoke with men in work uniforms on either side of her.

"Does everyone have a key on their right wrist?"

I heard a light metallic noise. An elastic band similar to those that held pool locker keys was around my wrist and had a key attached.

"The rules are simple. Each individual key is worth 100 million yen. When the attraction ends at dawn, you will be rewarded according to the number of keys you have. However, the key you have at the beginning does not count. Please acquire someone else's key whether by negotiation, threats, or force."

It was immediately obvious that the attraction could be easily ended if all of the participants traded their keys in a circle.

However, the trick was that the more keys we had at the end, the more we would be paid.

We would earn more if we did not simply trade in a circle. And if you attacked the person with the most keys, you could jump to the top regardless of what had happened before that.

And…

There was a good chance the six participants gathered on this island were all in a bad enough situation that 100 million yen would not be enough.

They might need 200 million yen or 110 million.

At any rate, the attraction had been intentionally created such that trading the keys in a circle would not be enough.

Those watching on from a safe place wanted to see us participants chose of our own free will to throw away the safe opportunity handed to us. Their cruel taste was painfully obvious.

But I did not care.

We were all in the same situation.

I had no reason to go easy on them.

“Okay, everyone draw one of these lots.”

We each chose one of some crude lots made from chopsticks. As if she was revealing the prize on a quiz show, the bunny girl then pulled away a large cloth to reveal something that had been hidden.

"These items will help you advance through the attraction. According to the lots you all drew, Tanaka-san gets two handguns, Tetsuyama-san gets a flamethrower, Tatsukawa-san gets a stun gun, Hikarikawa-san gets a 15-ton mobile crane, Harumura-san gets a military knife, and…ohh! Hayashino-san gets the joker prize! Hayashino-san's prize is Karen-chan!!"

"…What?"

I frowned. This was partially due to not having any idea what kind of item that was, but I also did not like having my name called out repeatedly. I did not want to gather attention this early in the game.

To answer my question, the bunny girl pointed her thumb at the center of her chest.

"That's me!!"

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait!!" shouted someone. It was the man who had won the mobile crane. "What do you mean he gets one of the organizers on his side!? Doesn't that give him too much of an advantage!?"

"This has nothing to do with whether it is an advantage or not. Drawing lots is unfair by its very nature. And how can you complain after winning that wonderful mobile crane?"

"B-but…"

"And this is just your initial equipment." The bunny girl named Karen grinned. "If you don't like it, then swipe someone else's after the attraction begins. And that of course means we might attack you in order to steal that crane."

"…"

Every single participant was focused on us. The bunny girl was probably doing it on purpose.

Even if we would end up killing each other eventually, there was still a proper order for this.

"Okay, everyone. Let's see…The attraction begins in 20 minutes. Take a nice stroll through the island until then."

She of course meant we should hide before the battle began.

We all exchanged a glance before the other participants ran off in different directions. They were likely planning to hide somewhere on the island and wait for an opportunity.

Left behind, I looked over at the bunny girl.

While the others received deadly weapons like a flamethrower, handguns, or a giant vehicle, I ended up with a girl.

"…So what exactly can you do?" I asked.

Karen swung her arms and legs around to create some strange stance before saying, "I can defeat a dinosaur with my fists! I can break through a rocky mountain with my kick!! And my special ability lets me make three actions in a single turn!"

Did I draw the dud lot that means all the other participants will come to kill me? Maybe I need to attack them by surprise sooner rather than later.

After noticing I did not seem very excited with the weapon I had won, the bunny girl began wiggling her hips around.

"Okay, okay. Let's talk seriously now. We only have a bit longer until the attraction begins. Where will we go hide?"

"This island's structures are divided into three overall areas. The coal mine, the old city, and the harbor. The entrance to the mine will likely have been sealed with steel plates when it was closed. All of the warehouses at the harbor had collapsed, so I don't remember seeing any remaining buildings there. That presents a problem. Do you know what that is?"

"We can't escape from the mobile crane."

"Exactly."

After all, that was a 15 ton monster. Even if it was safely driven at 50 kph, a person on the ground could do nothing to oppose it. And it was blatantly obvious what would happen if you were chased around by it.

"That means we need to go to the old city. If we hide on the upper levels of a building, the crane can't run us over."

"We could hide in the coal mine, couldn't we?"

"Forcing our way into a mineshaft with rusting footing and supports is a bad idea. If we break through the ground, we could fall over 100 meters down."

We ended up heading to the old city.

Since this was an abandoned island, there was no illumination. The deep darkness seemed to press in from every direction. Somewhere in that darkness hid attackers wielding deadly weapons. That malice made the darkness feel even deeper.

A lot of people must have worked in the mine when it was being used because the housing complexes were packed in unbelievably tight. Only a few dozen centimeters existed between buildings, so it looked like people could jump from window to window.

Some buildings had collapsed from the natural deterioration of time and they had caused a domino

effect in some areas. The rubble was even piled up in the roads, so the supposedly orderly cityscape had become something like a maze.

Everyday items were strewn about along with the rubble. With all of the dust covering them, it resembled some strange piece of reclaimed land.

I picked up a bag lying on the ground that had originally had Imada Construction printed on its surface. I then tossed it toward Karen.

…Imada Construction, hm?

"Gather some random egg-sized pieces of concrete and put them in that bag."

"…What will you use them for?"

"We have no weapons, so I want to procure some before the attraction begins."

What came to mind when you thought of projectiles? Guns? Bows? If you just needed something from the BCE time period, all you needed was a leather belt and some small stones. If you made a U-shape out of the belt, held a stone inside, and swung it around to throw the stone

with the centrifugal force, you had a sling. That could be deadly enough.

However…

I had heard that some tribes could kill wild beasts from a distance of over 100 meters, but even half that distance would be difficult for me. It was night and my targets would be moving. The distance I could throw the stone and the distance from which I could hit and injure someone were two different things.

"You sure are knowledgeable."

"The Swords and Firearms Control Law is well made, but it can't restrict access to items that are everywhere. You keep the bag. Swinging it around will work in place of a blackjack."

"What is that you're gathering there? Fishing weights?"

"Just a bit of insurance."

I entered a random crumbling building and headed up to the second floor so the mobile crane could not attack. I wanted to be low enough that I could jump to the ground if another participant had me cornered.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for something to light a fire with."

"…In this darkness?"

"Now is my only chance. This is still the preparatory period. Once the killing starts, the point of light could lead to my death."

I found a rusted portable stove. The gas cylinder had of course been removed, but I managed to light a fire by holding the ignition plug against an old scrap of cloth.

After a few more tricks, my preparations were complete.

"You thought this through."

"We need to move. I don't want to stay where that fire was."

We jumped from the building's window into the neighboring building's window.

I hid in the darkness with the bunny girl.

"…It should be starting soon."

Our personal possessions had been confiscated so I had no clock, but I could estimate based on about how much time I spent on travelling and preparations.

I stared at Karen in her bunny outfit.

"By the way, I forgot to ask. Do I have any guarantee you won't betray me mid-attraction?"

"None at all," said Karen nonchalantly. "Handguns have a risk of exploding, a portable crane has a risk of stalling, and I have my own risks. Do I really need to explain this?"

"…"

"Hm? Are you thinking you should silence me now if I might betray you later?" she said readily. "That is one

path you could take, but then you would really, truly be unarmed. Although if you think you can fight the others like that, I won't stop you."

The bunny girl was right. Nothing she had said was wrong.

But why was she able to remain so objective at a time like this?

Did she not fear for her life?

"What will you do? If you ask me, you should make up your mind quickly."

"…I'll use you for the time being."

"Is that so?"

A bright flare shot straight up into the sky in the distance.

That signaled the beginning of the attraction.

The killing game on Corpse Island where we would wash away blood with blood had begun.

As the attraction began, Karen and I continued to hide on the second floor of that housing complex.

This was simply because we heard the sounds of an engine from directly below.

It was that 15-ton mobile crane.

Such sounds were not uncommon in a city, but this was an abandoned island completely wrapped in darkness. The noise sounded much louder than normal. It sounded so loud I wondered if someone in the mine would have been able to hear it.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“He may be searching. He has been circling around the same area again and again and again, so he isn’t chasing someone.”

I did not think Karen was wrong, but we could not remain stuck here.

“Let’s go.”

"Oh, already? Rushing things will lead to mistakes. It is still 7 hours until dawn. Slowly solidifying a foundation may be better than forcing yourself to-…"

"I don't want to let the other participants do that," I replied quickly in a quiet voice. "Two handguns, a flamethrower, a mobile crane, a stun gun, a military knife , and you. That is the only information we all have. But that will change as time goes on. I don't want a situation where it looks like an enemy only has a knife, but then attacks with a projectile."

The bunny girl had called out everyone's names before the attraction began, but I did not remember who was who. After being thrown into this cruel attraction, human life was worth less than a small tool.

And so Karen and I began moving.

If we made our way to the ground, the mobile crane would have devoured us. Fortunately, the housing complexes were only a few dozen centimeters apart and the glass was missing from most of the windows, so we could easily jump from building to building.

"How do you plan to find the participants who do not have a loud mobile crane?"

"Can't you do something?"

"If you like, I can show off my mind reading skills!! Oh , or would you prefer a tarot fortune telling?"

I sighed in exasperation.

But I did not have a plan either.

"The routes between the old city, the harbor, and the mine are limited, so the standard method would be to set up a trap along them."

It was a small island, but it would take time to walk across the entire thing. And the other participants would constantly be on the move, so we could easily miss each other.

The mobile crane made plenty of noise, so it was no problem. However, it seemed I would have to kill the others the instant I ran across them or else I might never see them again.

Or…

Instead of searching, can I set up a trap so they come to me?

As soon as that idea entered my head…

"Freeze."

As soon as we heard that sudden female voice, Karen and I hid behind two lined up pillars. The woman might have simply been probing out the situation, but I was not willing to risk my life on that optimistic assumption. And I knew what weapon the person using that term would have.

The two handguns.

I heard a footstep.

Someone had entered the room.

"It's too late to hide. Just so you know, the enamel material on that bunny's outfit glitters a lot. That's probably why the crane has been driving around this area for so long."

I could not tell what she was after.

If she simply planned on shooting me and taking my key, she should have fired already. Or did she not want the crane to hear the gunshot?

Karen looked over at me from behind her pillar.

I gave her an order by making a sign with my fingers.

But I was not having her attack. If she did that, she would simply be driven back by a barrage of bullets. And this woman would hardly let us live in a situation like this.

Now then.

The real question was whether that creepily smiling bunny girl would follow my instructions or not.

It was entirely possible she would betray me at this first sign of real danger and join with the woman and her two handguns.

And then…

"Okay, okay. I get it, I get it."

She readily walked out from behind the pillar while pouting her lips like a child who had been playing video games when her mother asked her to run an errand.

She handled it so lightly even I was shocked and I was the one who had ordered her to do it.

"Oh? So you can use her like that," mockingly said the woman with the two handguns.

The bunny girl smiled and said, "It's what I was asked to do."

"Did you think I wouldn't shoot you because you're with the organizers?"

"You'll probably shoot. And I'll die if you do."

What is going on in that head of hers?

I had assumed the organizers who had put together this attraction were no normal people, but this was more than I had expected.

The woman with the two handguns seemed to pick up on how strange this was.

But…

"This is just as I expected or maybe even more. You look worthy of joining forces with," said the woman.

"…"

"You come out from behind that pillar, too. My gun is a 9mm. If you use this girl as a shield, I can't hit you."

I did as instructed.

This was the first time I would speak with one of the other participants.

"What are you after?" I asked.

"The defeat of our strongest enemy."

"I'd say the most dangerous one here is you with your two handguns."

"No, I'm not. These aren't anti-materiel rifles. Even a thin metal plate can deflect a 9mm. I want to defeat that mobile crane before it has a chance to reinforce itself like that."

And once that enemy was gone, nothing could stop her.

The flamethrower also looked quite dangerous, but the ones that ran from a tank worn on the back had a maximum range of only about 10 meters. Any more than that would roast the user with the heat. Her handguns could fire at a target 150 meters away, so she could easily kill him. If she adjusted the front sight and fired a bit upwards, she could reach him.

But…

It was true I would have no hope of winning if we didn't do anything about that mobile crane. As soon as he thought up a means of reinforcing the driver's seat with something like a metal plate, he would be unbeatable.

I had actually been hoping these two powerful enemies would end up killing each other, but it seemed I would be used as a pawn in the process.

"What can we do?"

"I do not have unlimited ammo. Specifically, I have 30 shots between the two guns. It would be difficult to make sure I shot the driver while running away from the crane. But," added the woman, "I have much better odds if I can focus on shooting while the crane pursues a different target. I'm no gunman, so I doubt I can manage it in just a shot or two even then. But I should be able to manage it before the magazines are empty."

"And you want us to lure him out?"

"I can't ask the other participants." The woman moved one of the gun barrels between Karen and me. "But you are different. The rest of us have only one life, but you have two. We can use that to our advantage."

"…I see."

Karen could betray me at any time, so it was unclear if she would follow my instructions to the very, very end. But if we began to lose to the mobile crane, I could ditch Karen and escape while the crane was focused on the woman with the two handguns.

And more importantly, if I refused here, I would be shot. The woman wanted Karen as a pawn, not me. She would probably try to threaten Karen after killing me.

"I guess I have no choice but to agree."

"If that is your decision, then we can do that," said Karen while smiling as always.

She made no complaint about the plan.

"But if we're going to lay a trap, we'll need your help," I told the woman.

"Could you be more specific?"

"Karen is not a participant, so she doesn't have one of the keys worth 100 million yen. In other words, she doesn't need to be killed. She needs some other form of bait if the crane is going to chase after her."

"I told you to be more specific," said the woman while waving a handgun.

That seemed to be the source of her absolute confidence, but it was what I was after.

"Give Karen a handgun. That is my condition."

"…Are you serious?"

"You said I have two lives, right? Well, unlike the other participants, you have two weapons. Even if you give up one, you will still have a decent advantage over everyone else."

And the handguns were the most powerful weapon. If the crane spotted Karen with it, he might try to eliminate the threat or acquire the weapon, but either way he would not be able to ignore it.

The woman stared cautiously at Karen and me.

"Isn't it possible a shootout will begin as soon as I hand over the gun?"

"Then take out the ammo before handing it over. We just need bait for the crane. The guy in the driver's seat won't be able to tell if it's loaded or not."

"Understood. …Don't move."

She would be the only one with a loaded gun.

The woman agreed because she would retain her advantage.

But…

"(Karen.)"

Whether it was a revolver or a semi-auto, all handguns had a common factor when it came to removing all of the ammunition. Do you know what that is?

The answer is simple.

Doing so required the use of both hands.

"(Attack on my signal. I'll take the right; you take the left.)"

Sudden footsteps reverberated through the room.

"Eh? Ah…"

The dumbfounded woman frantically tried to hold up her gun, but she was holding the one with no ammunition. The usable one was in its holster. The slight

hesitation due to her sudden decision and her indecision over whether to target the enemy to the right or left created an even greater lag.

That lag allowed us to overcome the deadly speed of a handgun that could kill with a single movement of the index finger.

Karen was holding a bag filled with egg-sized pieces of concrete.

The makeshift blackjack made a great noise as it split open the woman's skull.

I grabbed the handguns from the pool of blood and tossed one to Karen.

I had read in a book somewhere that humans found a sense of security in symmetry and found it beautiful. Whether it had anything to do with that or not, a woman with the side of her head smashed in was not a pretty sight.

Karen used the bag of concrete to wipe the blood off of the gun.

"Oh, my. We have already gotten the best weapons. Does that mean we're the strongest?"

"We can't just sit around celebrating. If the others find out two people have guns, they will all become our enemy. I don't want them deciding the danger is worth teaming up against us."

"Now that we have the guns, what will you do with the sling?"

"The more options, the better. If they think this is our only weapon, they might let their guard down."

"What is our next target?" asked Karen.

I turned on my handgun's safety and replied, "The flamethrower."

"Oh? Not the crane?"

"That is our greatest enemy, but I'm not sure two handguns are enough. A flamethrower would make it a lot easier. The crane runs on gasoline after all."

When it came down to simply killing people, the flamethrower would be the top ranked weapon. I did not

want to take it on with nothing but a metal pipe or a makeshift sling. But we had handguns now. As long as we had them, we could easily kill the man with the flamethrower.

"But the flamethrower has a range of 10 meters, right? If the crane is driving at full speed, won't it be too late by the time it is within range?"

"I'm not going to use it like that," I said while focusing on the engine noises coming from outside the window. " Its tank is filled with fuel, so we can use it like a bomb by setting it up on the ground. If we lure the crane in, we can watch it explode from a safe distance."

We had no hint to go on. We took the time to search around the island and ran into the man with the flamethrower on the mountain near the mine.

I had thought we could finish him off with a bullet or two, but we used a lot more ammo than I had expected. We may have focused too much on staying at a distance for safety.

"I have two bullets left."

"I have only one!"

The bunny girl named Karen pulled her handgun's slide to eject the final bullet in the chamber and tossed it to me.

We had originally had 30 shots between us, so it was a regretful amount of waste.

"We need to retrieve the flamethrower from the corpse right away. People could hear those gunshots all across the island."

"How about we turn it on the other participants?"

"We need the tank as full as possible to make sure we take out the crane in the explosion."

Also, I had no intention of using the flamethrower without special equipment like a firefighter's uniform. A change in the wind could easily leave me with serious burns. Even if the flames did not touch me directly, the hot wind could fuse my clothes to my skin.

"Will we wait for the crane here?"

"An open space is bad for setting the trap. And it has no elevated location to watch on safely. It would be best to set the trap in the old city."

I already had a handgun and the sling, so I gave the flamethrower's tank to Karen.

We entered the old city.

The easiest spot to set a trap was an entrance to the city. Buildings had been built up in such great concentration in such a small area, so the points from which the mobile crane could enter or exit were limited.

"It may be cracked, but this is asphalt. You can't dig a hole to bury it."

"We just need to pile up some concrete fragments the crane can crush in its path. If we hide the flamethrower tank inside, it'll work as a landmine."

"How are you going to make it explode?"

"By having the flamethrower's ignition plug…"

I trailed off as a brilliant light stabbed into my eyes.

Our stage was an abandoned island with no electricity or running water.

There was only one possibility.

“The crane!!” shouted Karen.

“Don’t try to set it up now! Take the tank with you!!”

This was one of the areas the crane could easily pass through, so it could of course set a trap for us. Chased by the sounds of the engine, Karen and I leaped into a nearby building.

The crane smashed into the entrance after us.

The front entrance’s glass had already been broken, but now the entire door was smashed to pieces. Huge fragments flew into the building. I frantically rolled further inside. The mobile crane’s bumper continued to approach while dragging the destroyed interior of the building with it. It looked like a giant hammer.

Everything shot towards us like a flood.

But then a single exception presented itself. A thick square pillar did not break. Several dozen pieces of rebar bent and stuck out, but the entire pillar did not snap. It stopped that 15 ton mass.

"!"

I immediately held up my handgun, but the crane backed up and left the building so quickly its tires screeched.

"Hurry! Upstairs!!" shouted Karen from the emergency staircase while holding the flamethrower tank .

She was right that I would be in trouble if the crane charged in again. I did not want to be around when that happened.

We both ran up the emergency staircase and arrived on the building's second floor.

Still holding the tank, Karen said, "If he is still focused on crashing into the building, isn't this our chance? If we throw the tank from a window, we might be able to drop it right on top of the crane."

"No…Wait. What is that sound?"

The mobile crane's engine was loud enough to hear even outside the old city, but the sound had changed.

I looked over at the window without thinking.

I had somewhat relaxed because the crane could not crash into the second floor.

But then something unexpected happened.

Something huge mercilessly crashed through one of the external walls on the second floor.

I fell over after being hit by some of the rubble, but I think it was more the surprise from the sudden noise that knocked me over. Karen and I crawled along the floor to frantically move away from the window (or rather, the spot where it had been a moment before).

A tremendous amount of dust limited our vision.

"Oh, my!! Would you look at that."

"He's swinging something around with the crane's wire? Has he strapped together steel frames to use in place of a wrecking ball?"

I felt like the entire floor had tilted. It was not often that a building made of reinforced concrete felt so unreliable.

I heard the sound of something roaring through the air .

The second impact was coming.

I looked around in hopes of finding a way of jumping to the neighboring building. But I did not make it in time. I did not have the guts to stand up in this situation. With a great shock, some large object broke through the wall and flew into the building. If that so much as grazed a human, he would be smashed.

Cracks ran through the ceiling and a piece larger than a tatami mat fell down.

"Um…"

"What?"

"If the crane is swinging something around, doesn't that mean its center of gravity is higher than normal? A crane needs to use a special leg to fortify its position when extending its arm. That means the crane cannot move right now. Doesn't that mean we can more safely approach it right now?"

If we did nothing, the third impact would soon arrive.

At this rate, even a normal building would be utterly destroyed. And this was one that had been abandoned for decades and had dubious earthquake resistance.

Standing up and running along would be easy enough , but anyone who was willing to do so while everything was shaking so much had to have a death wish.

If only there was some way to finish off the man controlling the crane without having to move.

"…I just had a horrible idea."

"What is it?"

"After that wrecking ball made up of pieces of metal framework hits the building, how long do you think it takes to pull it out from the rubble?"

"Well…About 10 seconds I think, but what can we do in 10 seconds? That isn't enough time to get up and jump out the window, much less head downstairs."

"We attach the flamethrower tank to the wrecking ball. It has to pass right by the main body of the crane while swinging, so we just have to detonate it at that exact moment."

"…Are you serious?"

"Tying it on with rope would take too long, but 10 seconds should be enough to attach something like a hook onto a wire."

With that makeshift wrecking ball making a mess of the place, bent pieces of rebar that could be used as a hook were lying everywhere. With a bit of preparation, I would be able to make something to attach the tank.

"Approaching that seems crazy to me," said Karen.

"This is the same as my first decision."

"?"

"If I had given into those two handguns and handed you over, I would have ended up cornered somewhere. Insisting on safety will get me nowhere. In this attraction at least, I need to take on some risk if I want to win."

The third impact was coming.

If it so much as grazed me, I would be smashed into a pile of meat.

But this was my last and greatest chance.

A burnt smell and orange flames assaulted the senses.

In reality, this attraction that used real human lives did not progress like scripted entertainment. In other words, it was not structured such that each consecutive enemy was more powerful than the last.

In my opinion, my most powerful enemy had been the first woman with the two handguns.

And with the two handguns, the flamethrower, and the mobile crane defeated, I had already eliminated the most obviously dangerous enemies.

That just left the military knife and the stun gun.

They simply could not compare to the previous enemies.

That meant the situation had reversed. With the enemies more powerful than myself defeated, it was my turn to hunt the others down and kill them.

"This didn't turn out right at all!" I groaned.

Gunshots rang out. But they were not being fired by us . They were likely audible everywhere on the island. Naturally, this was a new turn of events. I half-leaped behind the rubble of a crumbling warehouse at the harbor to hide alongside the bunny girl.

I heard a noise.

It had come from a man's corpse rolling to a stop right next to me.

He held a military knife in one hand, but he remained so motionless that he looked frozen.

"That just leaves the stun gun. Or did the last participant have the stun gun's owner hold the knife before killing him?"

"Hayashino-san… Did you forget the introduction back at the beginning? A girl had the stun gun."

But it was impossible for a self-defense item like that to blow a hole in a human body.

The only possibility I could think of was…

"Dammit. Was there an old hunting weapon left behind in the rubble or one of the buildings?"

"Seems that way. If the powder grew damp, it would have been useless, but it can keep for decades as long as it does not touch the outside air."

I could not say this was a wise move on my enemy's part. I had no way of knowing if this gun truly had been sitting on this island for decades or if it was a new one set up by the organizers. However, using an old gun that had been thrown out like an old rusted pipe was suicide.

Nevertheless, the enemy had acquired a powerful weapon by taking that risk that was akin to walking barefoot across a minefield.

The bunny girl leaned towards me and said, “From the look of that body, this is a rifle and not a shotgun.”

“I doubt she can hit a very distant target without a scope, but we only have three shots. If we don’t finish her off right away, the gunshots will tell her where we are.”

“What about that sling made from a belt? There are more small stones than we could ever need here.”

“It’s all over if we’re shot while swinging it around to build up centrifugal force. And it was only ever meant as a diversion. It isn’t enough to kill in a single strike.”

We had no idea how many bullets the enemy had, but if she had a full complement, we were at an overwhelming disadvantage.

Searching for a new weapon would require we carelessly travel through an open area. Yet staying in one place would allow the enemy to widely circle around

and target us with the rifle while out of range of our attacks.

I could hear the rifle being fired intermittently and the nearby ground and rubble was worn away bit by bit. She was searching for us rather than actually trying to kill us. But that would not last long. And her ability to do that showed she had plenty of ammunition. If she figured out how little we had, she would force her way in.

…So we're cornered.

I breathed in and then out while hiding behind the rubble.

I asked the bunny girl, "This attraction's prize is determined by the number of keys acquired rather than the number of people killed, right?"

"Yes, and?"

"It's a long shot, but I'm going to take a gamble based on that."

An explosive noise and a cloud of dust scattered throughout the dark harbor.

"Cough."

Tatsukawa Shouko, the girl who had drawn the lot for the stun gun and was now using a hunting rifle she had found in the city area, coughed lightly after breathing in some of the dust that flowed her way.

She had been intermittently firing at areas her enemy might be in the hopes of driving them into a panic, but something must have ignited because the rubble had suddenly exploded.

"Cough, cough. What was that? Did I shoot the fuel tank of a fishing boat?"

And then…

As Tatsukawa peered cautiously through the rifle's sight, she spotted a man's leg lying next to the flaming rubble.

"…Did that blow him up?"

Just to be sure, she fired two or three more shots in that direction but received no response. She doubted he was still hiding amid that burning rubble.

"So did I do it? Oh, there it is, there it is."

She spotted a man's arm in a gap in the rubble. She had no idea what had happened to the rest of the body. Just the arm was stuck there.

And a single key was visible on the elastic band on the wrist.

And several other keys came jangling from the clenched fingers.

"He'd collected a lot of these. Looks like waiting until the very end to make my move was the right decision."

Two handguns, a mobile crane, and a flamethrower.

While the others were winning powerful weapon after powerful weapon, Tatsukawa had won a stun gun. The other participants had likely looked on her with pity.

But she had not seen it that way.

The rules never said she needed to fight with only her initial equipment.

She had guessed the other participants would hunt down those with the most threatening weapons first and leave the easy jobs until later. And so Tatsukawa was off their radar. She had weaved through the gaps in the city and acquired a new powerful weapon.

She doubted she would have been able to do that if she had won a powerful weapon during the drawing.

Everyone would have focused their attacks on her, preventing her from moving around freely.

"One, two, three… Oh, this is everyone's! What an idiot. He had collected so many and yet he let me steal them all in the end."

She still had a fair bit of time until the time limit at dawn.

But she had all the keys and all the other participants were dead.

There was no real reason for the attraction to continue.

"Let's see. He was given that bunny girl as a weapon, but is she dead too? Hey! Who's running this thing!?"

"Coming."

Like a family restaurant waitress arriving to take her order, the bunny poked her head out from where she had been hiding nearby.

Tatsukawa Shouko was cautious, but…

"Oh? Didn't you call for me?"

"…Hm? Oh, I get it. Your owner lost the gamble, so you don't belong to anyone now." Tatsukawa lightly waved the man's arm before tossing it aside. "Anyway, I have all the keys. I've won it all. There's no point in continuing, so count the keys and pay me already."

"Hmm. But the time limit is not until dawn."

"I don't want to stay in this dusty place a second longer than necessary."

"I'm impressed you were willing to use that old hunting rifle. Weren't you afraid it would explode and blow your face off?"

"Ugeh. That can happen!?"

Either due to a sense of superiority over defeating everyone else or due to a fear of losing everything by blowing herself up in the very end, Tatsukawa hurriedly threw the hunting rifle to the ground.

The bunny girl continued smiling and said, "Are you sure you want me to add up your winnings with those?"

"Just get it over with."

"Understood."

The bunny girl checked over each of the metal keys attached to the elastic band Tatsukawa held out.

Still smiling, she said, "Um, you have 0 valid keys according to the rules. As such, you will receive no reward."

For an instant, Tatsukawa Shouko did not understand what she had just been told.

"What!? But…that can't be true! I have all the keys!!"

"Well, y'see, Tatsukawa-san. As explained at the beginning, the key you started with does not count toward your reward."

"I'm not talking about that one! What about the ones you have there!?"

"Oh, these?" The bunny girl tossed the keys to the ground like trash. "These are fakes created by making a mold of a real key and pouring melted lead inside. Fishing weights were easy enough to find and lead is well known for having a low melting point."

"Wh-wha…?"

"Oh, that blown-off arm? That belongs to the knife man you shot. He even had the knife with him, so it wasn't too hard to set up."

Tatsukawa Shouko's mind went blank, but then a thought came to her.

Tatsukawa had called for the bunny girl to end the attraction because she had thought everyone else was

dead and she had all the keys. The original limit had been dawn, so if she still had not found all of the real keys…

"It isn't over, you idiot," said a male voice to the side.

But before Tatsukawa could turn around, Hayashino, who held the real keys, unhesitatingly pulled the trigger of his handgun loaded with the three remaining bullets.

Exactly three gunshots rang out and Tatsukawa collapsed to the side.

And so everything really did come to an end this time.

Brilliant light covered the entire island, making it seem the darkness from before had never been there. It seemed countless spotlights of the type used in theatres had been installed. The light had no warmth, but the brightness seemed to restore reality like a film projector room after the movie had ended.

A large number of men and women in work uniforms appeared from somewhere.

The bunny girl smiled and spoke to me.

“Well done.”

“I was just lucky. If she had seen through the lead keys I made as insurance, if she had seen through the severed arm, if the lead keys had melted in that fire, or if she had been more cautious and kept the hunting rifle, I would have been done for. You can’t say I had everything under control.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

I knew what she was trying to say.

Today, I had definitively decided to kill someone myself.

No matter how much I had succeeded here, I could never return to where I used to be.

“You win a full 500 million yen. How would you like to be paid?”

“In cash.”

“A diamond would take up less space.”

"I said in cash."

Without ever dropping the smile, the bunny girl snapped her fingers. The surrounding people in work uniforms began contacting someone.

"By the way, may I ask what you need this 500 million for?"

"It's nothing special," I spat out. "I just need a foothold to begin a bit of revenge. Revenge against someone like you."

Did you see that, Imada?

I'm no longer just all talk. I can actually kill people.

Imada Construction was one of the largest underworld general contractors that helped construct the stages for this sort of attraction, but if I could play the part of someone with a fair bit of wealth, I could likely make an appearance at their salon.

Attraction 09: Killing Someone by Solving a Mystery Not Involving a Murder

I had to win.[1]

I had tried every available option. I had lost everything: my money, my social standing, and all the many people I had called friends. Everyone had left me. But I had still been unable to find the precious person who had gone missing. And so I had gotten the help of an organization. They had confidently said they could do it. It had almost seemed they must have had something to do with his disappearance, but that was fine. Anything was fine as long as I was able to make my way closer to him.

And so I read through the rules of the attraction.

First, register a two digit number in this machine.

Afterwards, both participants shall try to search out the other's number. That is all this attraction is.

"…"

I used my index finger to enter a number into a panel with the numbers 0 to 9 lined up like on a calculator. I was entrusting my fate to this number.

I could not see my opponent's face.

I had no idea what bait my opponent had been lured here with.

It was a bit like we were facing each other across a table, but a thick wall covered everything but our hands much like the reception area at a bank or post office. The main difference from those places was that this wall was solid instead of transparent.

…What a pain.

In a one-on-one game, it had to come down to psychological warfare. For that reason, not being able to see my opponent's expression or eye movements was a disadvantage.

Several cards lay on the table.

A quick count numbered them at about 20 and they all had “questions” on them.

“Divisible by 1.”

“Divisible by 2.”

“Divisible by 3.”

“Divisible by 4.”

“Divisible by 5.”

“Divisible by 6.”

“Divisible by 7.”

“Divisible by 8.”

“Divisible by 9.”

“Even.”

“Larger than 50.”

“The sum of Digit 1 and Digit 2 is larger than 15.”

"The product of Digit 1 and Digit 2 is larger than 25."

"The difference of Digit 1 and Digit 2 is negative."

"The quotient of Digit 1 and Digit 2 is a whole number."

"Digit 1 and Digit 2 are more than 5 apart."

"Reversing Digit 1 and Digit 2 produces a larger number."

"The square of the number is odd."

"The square of the number is over 2000."

"Thrice the number is over 50."

I knew there were methods of finding out what number someone had thought of, but I did not know the trick to them. Was it possible with just these cards or were the questions limited to ensure I had to guess?

The smiling bunny girl who was circling around the table while ignoring the partition said, "When you ask a question, slide the question card through the slit at the bottom of the partition. You must give an accurate

answer to the question. We will be double-checking for you, so no cheating, okay?"

We were forbidden to talk outside of the bare minimum needed to answer the questions.

It was still possible there was a way of reading my opponent's mental state from how they gave their answer, though.

The bunny girl then added, "Once one player uses a card, neither player may use it. In other words, if one of you plays 'even', neither of you can play 'even' after that."

"…"

"You will take turns using cards. Once you know your opponent's number, press this button. The one who answers first is the winner, but you automatically lose if you give an incorrect number. That means you will be killed, so be careful."

"One question."

"Yes, what is it?"

"If we take turns, won't the player who goes first have an advantage? They get the first shot at the cards that can 't be used again and they get the information needed to find the number sooner."

"But using a combo of multiple cards can be used to determine the number. The second player may have the most useful cards sealed, but they have the chance of determining their opponent's combo and sealing it. And about the ultimate answer, we will also give the second player an opportunity to answer if the first player answers correctly. If you are both correct, the round ends in a draw. You will then enter a new number and begin the second round."

"…"

The bunny girl casually performed a coin toss to determine the playing order.

"Okay, Saiki-san. You go first!"

I was first.

I glanced over the cards lined up on the table. At first, it seemed all the different options were convenient, but that was not the case. There were a few obvious trap cards that gave the same information as another card.

"Divisible by 2."

"Even."

"The square of the number is odd."

Those three all meant the same thing.

"Divisible by 2."

"Divisible by 4."

"Divisible by 6."

"Divisible by 8."

Those four…

"Divisible by 3."

"Divisible by 6."

"Divisible by 9."

…and those three would be best used when the number was small. Of course, they could be used in other ways depending on the situation.

But there was one question I needed to ask first.

One important question card would narrow down a lot of numbers from the possibilities for the random 2 digit number.

And…

As a preemptive strike, I wanted to keep my opponent from using that card.

"This is the one," I muttered as I slipped the card through the slit in the partition to ask my opponent their first question.

The card said, "Larger than 50."

The answer I received was, "No."

That meant my opponent's number was less than 50.

I knew exactly which card I wanted to use next, but…

A card slid toward me through the slit.

I read it.

"Even."

"…No."

So that's what you're going for, hm? How naïve.

As previously explained, a few cards explained the same thing in different words.

I grabbed one of those and pushed it through the slit.

"Divisible by 2."

"Yes."

With that, I had narrowed down the 100 possibilities to about a quarter of that.

In other words…

2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42, 44, 46, or 48.

But accurately narrowing down the candidates from here on would be difficult.

As I brought that string of numbers to mind, a card slid toward me from the other side of the table.

"Divisible by 3."

"…? No, but…"

I frowned at that question card, but still answered.

He just asked me if it was even or odd, so why?

"Ah!?"

"Saiki-san, please do not speak outside of answering the questions."

The bunny girl lightly rebuked me, but I had other things to worry about.

Not good.

Not good!!

I had answered no to if it was even and no to if it was divisible by 3.

What that told my opponent was obvious.

I had revealed that my number was a fairly special example of an odd number.

If he asked if it was divisible by 5 and if it was divisible by 7, he would narrow it down quite a bit. Even if I answered no both times, he would find out I had chosen an extremely special number that was not divisible by any whole number!

Should I use up either "divisible by 5" or "divisible by 7" to seal his combo?

But neither of those cards would help me determine what number my opponent had chosen. I would waste a turn. The first person to answer correctly won, so it was best to find my opponent's number with as few question cards as possible.

"Saiki-san? Hurry, hurry."

Kh.

Should I go the high risk, high return route by finding his number as quickly as possible?

Or should I go the low risk, low return route by protecting my number?

After thinking for a bit, I slid a card through the slit.

"Divisible by 5."

"Yes."

…Huh?

I had been too afraid to gamble and decided to waste a turn, but that had actually narrowed it down quite a bit.

After all, the only possible numbers left were…

10, 20, 30, and 40.

Those were the only four.

In that case, I could determine his number with two cards that each narrowed those four down by half.

But what would my opponent do in response?

After being this cornered, he would likely use one of the really good question cards I was thinking of. But…

"Divisible by 7."

"Eh…?"

I was caught off guard.

But…eh?

It was true that was one strategy, but…

"Saiki-san, please give your answer."

"N-no."

I answered honestly, but I was dissatisfied.

I could only think my opponent's strategy was to determine my number as quickly as possible to end the game before his unfavorable situation could work against him.

But could he risk his life on that?

I could end this game by determining his number out of four options.

Normally, he would be working to seal any possible combos of mine.

I could not tell what my opponent was thinking.

I felt very uneasy. I was no longer sure the situation was developing as nicely as I thought it was.

I glanced over the cards I had left and sent the one I needed through the slit.

The question was…

"Divisible by 4."

"Yes."

That left only 20 or 40 as options for my opponent's number.

But…

He had answered almost immediately. He had not hesitated. And the next card slid towards me was…

"The product of Digit 1 and Digit 2 is larger than 25."

He's still going on the attack!?

That did not seem to narrow it down quite as much as "divisible by 5" or "divisible by 7", so his strategy seemed to be showing some cracks. And yet he had still shown no sign of sealing my combo.

"No."

I answered, but doubt spiraled around within me.

What was going on?

Was my opponent just an idiot who was not thinking at all? Or was he leading me with the thought that I would win?

In other words…

Did I not have my opponent as cornered as I thought I did?

Was it possible I was being led to an incorrect answer?

My fingertips trembled.

Even so, I grabbed a card and sent it through the slit.

“Divisible by 8.”

“Yes.”

It was over.

The answer was 40.

That had to be the answer, but something was still bothering me. What was it? I could think of nothing wrong about my calculations or strategy. I had been led to the correct answer. But I still had a strange uneasiness in my chest.

And it came from my opponent’s lack of hesitation.

It could of course be a bluff, but what point would that serve? Playing even a single card to seal my combo would have forced me to play more cards to find this answer.

"…Wait."

Wait a second.

Could it be…?

I thought back over the cards I had played up to that point.

"Larger than 50."

The answer had been no.

"Divisible by 2."

The answer had been yes.

"Divisible by 5."

The answer had been yes.

"Divisible by 4."

The answer had been yes.

"Divisible by 8."

The answer had been yes.

Nothing seemed strange at first glance, but the sequence of "divisible by X" bothered me. It was divisible by 2, 4, 5, and 8. It was divisible by everything I had asked. A number like that was not too common. More importantly, I doubted someone would normally risk their life on a number like that.

Of the "divided by" series from 1 to 9, the number I had chosen was only divisible by 1.

So there was more to this.

What was the identity of this troubling feeling I had? What was the great trap my opponent had laid?

Was there an answer other than 40?

If he had chosen his number to trap someone calculating out the number via the normal method, there was only one option.

"I've got it!!"

I slammed my palm down on the button equipped on the table and a cheap electronic tone sounded.

The bunny girl asked, “Okay, Saiki-san. What number did your opponent choose!?”

This would end it.

I had to choose one of two options.

In the off chance that my opponent had given this no thought at all, I was throwing away the correct answer and running to my own destruction.

But I seriously doubted that was the case.

If he did not have some kind of plan, he would not have showed so little hesitation in his answers.

In that case…

The number chosen by this person I had never seen was…

“Zero!!”

Notes

1. ↑ The narrator uses a feminine first person pronoun .

Intermission 3

"My eyes are bleary."

"How long has it been since we started?"

"All these corpses have numbed my heart."

"Eh? I thought the bunny was in there to counteract that?"

"Then they should have put in a hot male bar tender, too. They need gender equality in sex appeal!!"

"But you're a guy."

"So?"

"Anyway, is that bunny outfit really her work uniform ? Isn't that going too far?"

"It's like a display of defiance against this world where even family restaurant uniforms are having all the sexual elements removed. I love it."

"Does that mean we would have to wear that too if we leveled up from unofficial employees to official ones?"

"It can't be helped. I'm willing to prove I'm a man by showing off some skin. After all, it's so hard to find a job these days. It can't be helped!!"

"You don't have to look so happy about it! Is everyone here a pervert!?"

(The intermission will soon come to an end. Please continue helping us with this monitoring. If you have not been filling out your form for any reason, please begin soon.)

Attraction 10: Earn 200,000 Yen with 1 Millimeter

The attraction had 5 participants.

But even that many seemed an extraordinary number of people to gather in such an insane place.

“Okay, this here is a guillotine. I’m sure you have all heard that name before.”

The room looked like it could exist in any multi-tenant building.

That rectangular box had all furniture and office equipment removed. Instead, two very out of place objects could be seen in the center of the room.

The first was the representative example of a medieval execution tool, the guillotine.

The second was a smiling bunny girl giving the explanation.

“Those being executed are restrained in this. You see the three holes below the giant blade? The neck and wrists go in there.” The bunny girl raised her index finger. “This blade weighs 170 kilograms. The blade is

usually sloped to more efficiently cut off a human head, but this attraction requires the blade to be flat. Sorry about that. Some models hold the blade up with a rope that is cut to drop the blade and some models hold the blade up with a chain and drop it by operating the gear and attachments. This is the latter."

No one said anything.

A strange atmosphere enveloped the room.

This location seemed soaked in a sense that it did not matter if humans lived or died.

It was possible the headquarters of a cult would be filled with the same atmosphere.

"Now I will explain the rules of the attraction. But don't worry, it's nothing difficult. One at a time, the participants will each have their neck and wrists restrained within the guillotine. You will then be given a switch to hold in your right hand and a switch to hold in your left hand."

She showed us a red switch and a blue switch with cords attached.

It looked like we would operate them with our thumbs .

"The red switch drops the guillotine's blade and the blue switch stops the blade. We would like you all to stop the blade just before it decapitates you. You will be awarded with money based on how far the guillotine made it. However," the bunny girl raised her index finger again, "the reference point for your prize is not the highest point where the guillotine starts. It is the very center point. About a meter high is the zero point. You will be paid if the blade falls further than that, but you will need to pay us if it does not make it that far."

That meant we would only be given anything in the lower meter.

"Your prize will be calculated based on one millimeter being worth 200 thousand yen. If you truly stop it at the very last instant, you will earn 200 million."

An odd atmosphere floated around the five of us.

We needed 200 million.

And we could not trust an empty hope like betting on winning the lottery. Our lives would truly be over if we

did not acquire that much money right away. Only people like that would gather in a place like this.

The bunny girl pulled out some makeshift lots created from chopsticks like we were playing the king game in a karaoke box.

This would decide my fate.

The attraction was beginning.

This was all or nothing.

We could not practice and we could not redo this, so we needed to gather as much information as possible beforehand to find a means of ensuring victory.

The person who went first had an overwhelming disadvantage. I desperately wanted one of the other participants to take on that role so they could test the balance of the attraction, but the other four would be thinking the same thing.

The first step toward either life or death would be decided by these horribly carelessly-made lots.

Lot 1 was drawn by a small old man with glasses.

Lot 2 was drawn by a college-aged girl wearing a kimono.

Lot 3 was drawn by a middle-aged man who was wearing a suit but did not look like a salaryman.

Lot 4 was drawn by me.

Lot 5 was drawn by a high-school aged boy wearing sportswear.

"Okay, Yamai-san. You are up first. Come on up. Come on up."

So the old man is the top batter.

I felt sorry for him, but I did not have time for sympathy. The time had come to keep my eyes open wide. I needed to gather as much information as possible . What I wanted to know most was the timing or lag between pressing the buttons and the guillotine starting or stopping.

I needed to gather all the information I needed before it was my turn.

It was obvious what would happen to my head if I did not.

"…"

Urged on by the bunny girl, the nervous-looking old man was placed within the execution device. The tool was meant to kill criminals, so it provided no dignity whatsoever. With his head and arms held in place, the man was left in a crawling position like a dog.

The bespectacled old man was handed the two buttons .

It was about to begin.

This attraction that used a device designed to kill to toy with people's lives and dignity was about to begin.

"You can choose whatever timing you like, but I will drop the blade if you do not begin within three minutes. If you are not confident in your ability, it might be better to leave it up to me."

There was no way that was true.

I did not know how fast the guillotine fell, but not knowing the exact timing with which it would fall was a definite disadvantage. That time lag could be the difference between life and death.

With his body restrained, the old man moved only his eyeballs around in a desperate attempt to look around the area.

He may have wanted any last hint he could find.

He may have wanted someone to give him some advice.

Or…

He may have wanted to give a human complaint that this was wrong despite having come this far.

"…"

Given the angle of his neck, I doubted the old man could see my face as I looked down on him, but I shook my head regardless.

If he had not fallen as low as he could fall, he would not have been invited to this attraction. Nor would he have agreed to come.

He needed to prepare himself.

He needed to remember that he had searched in every single direction and not found a single opportunity. If he did not want to be sent straight back to that dead end, he had to win here.

And…

I heard a long, drawn-out sound like air leaking from a balloon.

I soon realized it was the sound of the old man breathing out long and slow.

And in the next instant…

The first round began and the giant blade fell.

Everyone watching on must have felt like electricity was running through them.

I thought my heart had stopped.

I had to observe.

I had to gather information.

That work was directly linked to my own survival, yet all of it left my mind completely in that moment.

The 170 kilogram blade held up by a long chain and gear fell vertically. It was a simple phenomenon, yet it held tremendous weight due to its deadly purpose.

In reality, the nightmare could only have lasted for a second or maybe slightly longer.

The bunny girl smiled and said, “Yamai-san is out!”

An unpleasant liquid dripped down below the guillotine.

But it was not fresh blood.

It was tears. It was sweat. It was snot. Every liquid that could flow from a face was flowing out as the old man trembled. All the dignity provided by his age was gone.

The problem was the location of the guillotine blade.

The bunny girl exaggeratedly stared at the measurement markings on the guillotine's column.

"You came in at only 72.2 cm. Not enough! I went to such effort to explain that 1 meter was the zero mark, but you didn't even get close!! You had two meters total, but you did not even make it halfway!!"

She was rubbing salt in the wound.

The bunny girl snapped her fingers and some men in work uniforms entered from outside the room. They removed the old man from the guillotine in order to carry him somewhere else.

"And that means Yamai-san must receive a penalty! He will receive a debt equal to the negative amount of height. Let's see, 1 millimeter is 200 thousand yen, so how much would that be?"

"Gh…kh…"

"Hey, Yamai-san. I have no idea what led you to this final attraction, but maybe you would have been happier if you had lost your head."

"Aaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

The old man gave a bestial cry, but the men in work uniforms calmly held his arms and legs and speedily removed him.

He had saved his life.

But I doubted there was any hope left for that old man.

He had lost any chance of turning his life around.

That was the type of failure we gained if we failed to let the guillotine drop.

"Okay, time for round #2. Ise-san, come on up."

The woman in the kimono's shoulders jumped in shock, but she knew there was no escape. In order to grasp the sole chance remaining for her, she needed to get on the ground as instructed so she could be restrained within the guillotine.

I was #4, but my turn would come up quite soon at this pace.

I wanted to gather as much useful information as I could. I wanted a surefire method of stopping the guillotine at the last possible second.

And then…

"(Have you caught on yet?)" The sportswear-wearing boy whispered that in my ear while watching the attraction with his arms crossed. "(Have you caught on to the main issue with this attraction?)"

"(The chain does not move as smoothly as I thought. And yet making the brakes work more ambiguously would work up our fear more.)"

"(They probably want to make that as fair as possible. It makes it feel like they're looking down on us mockingly.)"

"(Even though the bunny girl has a system to freely drop the blade if the participant takes too long?)"

"(What if they can remotely turn off the brakes if it looks like someone is going to make it? I would be more worried about the blue button.)"

I did not think they would do that. Or maybe I just did not want to believe they would.

The little bit of observation I had done was enough to tell me that. They wanted to enjoy watching people struggle futilely, so they would not set it up so we all quickly died one after another.

Still, I decided to have the bunny girl step away from the button during my attempt.

"(I think another issue is more important.)"

"(Another issue?)"

"(You'll figure it out soon enough. It's quite a cruel trick given the attraction's rules.)"

My focus had turned to the boy in the sportswear.

That was why I did not notice when the second round began.

I heard a different sound than before. It sounded like something soft being sliced through.

My consciousness was dyed in red.

I could not grasp the source of the iron smell. I could not understand why my clothes felt wet. I could not figure out how it was possible the body of the kimono-wearing woman had slid to the ground despite her being restrained in the guillotine.

I saw a head.

I saw two hands.

They were lying in a dark red puddle.

"Eh? Ah…?"

I saw them, I looked at them, and I stared at them.

Finally, the result of the attraction's second round entered my head.

Failure.

Killing.

Death.

Those simple words floated up in my mind, but they still did not seem to match the scene before my eyes.

Someone had died.

They had been decapitated.

And yet I had not heard a scream. The head had been sliced from the body as simply as someone removing the changeable head of a doll. Was that all there was to human life? Was it something lost so easily? I had always thought a life was protected my some sort of invisible rails.

“Ise-san is out!” said the smiling bunny girl who was as soaked with blood as I was.

I could not let my mind go blank.

I had to think. I had to observe.

My fate would be decided by how much information I had gathered by the time my turn came. But despite keeping that in mind, the scene before me was so vivid my thoughts seemed to lack any continuity.

The men in work uniforms came in once more and took out the kimono-wearing woman who was most certainly dead.

The bunny girl did an extremely apathetic job of wiping the blood off of the guillotine before saying, " Okay, round #3. Yate-san, come on up."

"N-no…" The man who was wearing a suit but was obviously not a salaryman shook his head as he trembled . "I've had enough!! This…this isn't normal! It's messed up!! I'm not doing it. I would rather do the most difficult job in the world over this!"

"Yate-san?"

"I'm not doing it. I told you I'm not doing it! H-hey!! I said I'm not doing it!! I'm leaving. Stop! Let go of me!! Hey! Dammit!! I said let go!!"

"Yate-saaan?"

The men in work uniforms grabbed the man in a suit, forced him into the humiliating pose, and restrained him within the guillotine that stank of iron.

And then it hit me.

"(I see now.)"

"(Did you figure it out?)"

"(They force us down on all fours like a dog, so we can 't see how far the guillotine has passed. This is more than just a game of chicken.)"

"(Exactly. The problem is that we have no way of winning this attraction without overcoming that.)"

Participant #3 did not press the red button or the blue button.

But the bunny girl did something which caused a change in the chain and gear holding the giant blade in place. The blade quickly fell and the head fell immediately afterwards.

More fresh blood gushed out.

I was surprised to find it was much less of a shock than the first time.

Had I begun to grow accustomed to it after experiencing it once? Or had my fear surpassed its limits so my senses had numbed over?

The body was carried out like a mere object.

Now completely covered in red, the bunny girl said, " Okay, #4."

Had I finished my observations?

Had I found a surefire method?

No.

It wasn't enough. It was nowhere near enough!

"Yamazaki-san, come on up."

She urged me on.

It was my turn.

An unpleasant sweat poured out of me.

But I had to do it.

I had just been shown that resisting it did nothing to help.

Once I was on all fours like a dog with my neck and wrists fixed into the guillotine, I tried to glare up at the bunny girl.

But I failed.

I could only see up to her waist.

“I’ll do it myself, so keep your hand away from your button.”

“Do you think I would cheat?” said the bunny girl while doing as I said.

Now, what was I to do?

I could not see the guillotine above me in this pose. And if I did not know how far away the giant blade was, I could not know when to press the blue button.

In that case, I needed to measure the time and speed of the falling guillotine.

But it was too late to start thinking about that once it was my turn.

I needed to have done that ahead of time in order to have a perfect and surefire method of victory.

I had been given three chances to watch the attraction.

But I had not used those chances effectively.

Had the boy in the sportswear actually made proper observations? Or was he planning to use my round to do that?

With no basis to go on, I would have to press the blue button purely on instinct. If I was too slow, it would literally kill me. The rules were much too severe to rely on my instincts.

I needed something.

I needed some way to see the guillotine blade.

"…?"

As I stared at the ground below me, I noticed something.

The floor.

Instead of carpeting, it was prepared like the floor of a school or hospital. In other words, it reflected light. It was not as good as a mirror, but I could see some vague shadows.

I could grasp the distances using that.

If you wanted to see something behind you, it was common sense to use a mirror.

"No…"

I started gripping the red button tighter, but then I changed my mind.

Wait.

Is it really that simple?

Reading writing reflected in a mirror was not easy. In the same way, it was possible my mind would not accurately process the information even if the images were accurate. The guillotine blade could fall before my mind could catch up to the deviation in the image.

When I thought about it, anyone's gaze would fall on this point when forced into this dog-like pose.

Despite two people being killed, the bunny girl had gone out of her way to wipe away the pool of blood.

Why?

It was to make sure this trap still functioned!!

Just as a drowning man would grasp at a straw, we would easily jump at this trap with our limited information. I needed to calm down. I could not fall for this trap. I needed to observe everything calmly. I needed to think about those who had set up this trap.

Why had they set it up?

It had to be to distract us from something else. That was the standard technique used by magicians. There had to be something. There had to be a surefire method. This trap was here to keep us from noticing it.

But…

What was it?

What exactly was it?

"Yamazaki-san? What's wrong? If the time limit passes , I will drop the guillotine myself."

My heart was not beating properly.

I had no solution.

Could I do nothing but entrust my life to my intuition?

I could not watch the guillotine fall, so was there any other way to accurately measure the blade's fall?

"There is."

"There is what?"

There was a way to measure it.

I tried to raise my head, but I just felt a dull pain in my neck where it was restrained. I could not watch it fall. But there had to be away.

Not the guillotine blade itself.

The chain and gear that were used to hold it in place.

"Hey, kid! You, the one going after me!!"

"Eh? Me?"

"Tell me how big the gear directly above me is and how many teeth it has! That will let me win this!!"

"Wait, you are supposed to complete this attraction alone," complained the bunny girl.

How naïve.

I had been making observations the entire time. I had been gathering the information I needed to win.

And so I could be sure.

"There wasn't a rule saying we couldn't receive advice . And our reward has nothing to do with anyone else's performance, so that kid has no reason to betray me. Listen up, if I win here, you'll be able to figure out the trick to it. If you want to know a surefire way to save yourself, help me now!!"

The boy wearing sportswear sighed and said, "The gear has a diameter of about 20 cm. I think it has about 70 teeth."

I had won.

As the chain moved, the gear would turn. I could count the number of times I heard the chain and the teeth strike. If I had an accurate idea of how far the guillotine

had fallen, I could win this ridiculous blindfolded game of chicken.

And then the bunny girl added, “But you do not know if Matsui-san was telling the truth.”

“The rules of this attraction give him no reason to betray me.”

“But the rules do not say he needs to help you out either. What if he has always wanted to betray someone who thinks he is their last hope?

A silence followed.

Asking for an answer from the boy would be meaningless.

What good would it do to ask him if he was telling the truth or lying?

I lightly touched the surface of the red switch with my thumb.

“I can win this.”

“Really?”

"I will win and redo my life!! And the first step is dropping this guillotine!!"

"I'm not so sure it will work out that well for you."

I felt an infinite pressure emanating from the red and blue switches.

Nevertheless, I had to continue on.

The guillotine.

A tool for execution.

A tool created to kill.

I held the switch that would make it move.

I held the red switch.

And I pressed it.

Final Check Before Handing in the Papers

That completes the monitor videos.

Has everyone finished entering in their points of improvement?

If you have not, please hurry up.

Just to be sure, I will now repeat my explanation of that.

For each attraction, please locate any imperfection in the rules and enter at least three points of improvement to make the attraction more difficult.

That is all. It is quite simple. If you find more than three, feel free to add on extras. At any rate, locate every single imperfection and write them all down.

Have you finished?

Okay, time is up.

Please pass your answer sheets up to the front.

One, two, three… Good, I have all of them.

That completes this monitoring.

We thank you for your hard work.

…We truly do.

A Certain Voice Mail Message

"You have one message."

Hey, hey, onii-chan. It's me.

Leaving a message makes me nervous for some reason . It's weird how different it is not having someone to talk to.

Well, that doesn't matter.

I hear you've gotten yourself involved in something dangerous again, but try not to do that too much.

Do you not think you're involved in anything dangerous?

C'mon now. The dangers that you can tell are dangerous are third rate at best. The truly dangerous things don't even look dangerous, so they're a real pain to deal with.

And they're often located quite nearby.

For example, have you heard the story of "the person on the phone"?

Someone is talking to their lover over the phone, but their lover seems to be acting weird. Well, there are a lot of different variations on the story, but it always turns out the person was speaking with someone dangerous instead of their lover. Some versions have the person realize it and save them while others have them not realize it and not save them.

That is where the true dangers lie.

They are guaranteed to be safe, but then they overturn that assumption.

You run across that kind of thing sometimes, so be careful.

…Hm?

I wonder if talking about that will make you stop trusting this message of mine?

That would make me sad…is what you want to hear, right? Well, that's not the type of person I am.

But…

There might be a danger of people wanting to reach me using your phone and pretending to be you.

Bye, onii-chan.

Having a girl who is not related to you in the slightest call you that is one of the more enjoyable examples of the absurd, so make sure you don't give up at that early stage.

The End of a Major Assumption

"Uuh…"

As he let out a groan, Higashikawa Mamoru could not tell where he was. Like the morning after drinking enough alcohol to bathe in, his head pounded and he could not remember how he had gotten here or what had led him to come here.

But the more direct reason for his confusion was that he was surrounded in complete darkness. He could tell he was lying on a hard floor, but he could not find a desk , chair, or any other furniture when he stretched out his arm to feel around. He had no idea how far away the walls were. The area could be as large as a giant domed stadium or as small as an apartment bathroom.

Higashikawa wanted light.

With a look of realization, he reached into his pants pocket. But the cell phone that was usually there was missing. The wallet he kept in the other pocket was missing as well. This made him think someone had maliciously left him here.

As he had no memories, it was possible he had thrown them out himself, but it made more sense if someone else had taken them.

(Why do I have this dull headache?)

The last thing he could remember before the blank in his memories was working a part time job at an amusement park known as Attraction Land. It had been a temporary job that had him monitoring or debugging some future attractions by finding any imperfections or flaws in some image videos. He had found the job posted on a bulletin board listing authorized jobs at the university he attended.

He could not imagine how that had led to this darkness.

He did not know what his situation was, so it was possible the lights were simply off.

But that did not explain the headache.

Where had the other participants gone? Where was the woman working for Attraction Land that had overseen their work? Higashikawa wondered if the others would have just left him while he lay sprawled out in the room.

"What is going on?"

Pain shot out in every direction from the core of his head.

He would not feel like this if he had simply fallen asleep.

He could only think he had consumed alcohol or something with similar affects, but he did not remember drinking anything while watching the videos.

In that case, what had happened?

Unless some strange gas had been pumped into that room, he could not explain his current situation.

And if that was the case, why had it happened to him?

Before he could come up with an answer, something happened.

A loud electronic tone rang out repeatedly in the darkness.

The sound itself was common enough; it was the one use in department stores to preface a lost child notification. However, it was extraordinarily loud. It was loud enough to cause a noticeable vibration in the floor Higashikawa's cheek was pressed up against. Needless to say, this did nothing to help with the dull pain throbbing in his head.

It grew louder and louder like an alarm clock.

Did that mean something had been done to him that required that much noise to bring him to his senses?

After the speaker's volume was lowered, a female voice began speaking.

He could see nothing in the darkness, but the voice was staticky enough for Higashikawa Mamoru to realize the voice was coming in over a speaker.

"Okay, okay, okay. Now that the preparations are complete, it's finally time to get to our real purpose here. "

"…?"

It was the voice of the female Attraction Land worker.

But Higashikawa had no idea what she meant.

(Preparations? Our real purpose?)

"I suppose you wouldn't know what I am talking about. Fortunately, I have set up this room to help you grasp the situation as quickly as possible. If you look over there, I think you will figure it out right away."

Higashikawa Mamoru heard a clicking sound.

At the same moment, his vision was filled with pure white.

The room's lights had come on.

It was an obvious truth, but the pain stabbing through Higashikawa's eyeballs and into his head was too great for him to grasp it at first. His eyes having grown accustomed to the darkness was not enough to explain it. His inner ear stopped working properly, so he lost his balance despite lying flat on the floor. He felt like he was on a small boat.

He had no idea how he had been knocked unconscious , but the speed of his pupil dilation may have been thrown off.

After 30 seconds of pain and resisting the urge to vomit up the contents of his stomach, he finally began to see vague images through the pure white of his vision.

The images slowly came into focus and Higashikawa Mamoru was able to check on his situation.

He was in a square room about the size of a school classroom. It had no windows and its only exit was a door made of thick steel. It had no desks, chairs, or any other furniture. A speaker and a clock were hanging on the wall. It truly was nothing but a square space

But there was one thing Higashikawa did not grasp at first despite seeing it right before him.

His mind had put it off.

It was what he most had to focus on, yet he could tell he was consciously forcing it to the very edge of his vision.

But that was not too surprising.

In the center of the room was a mass of flesh.

When he looked more closely, he realized it was a woman's corpse that was missing its head and hands.

He shouted something.

Having a corpse in front of him was bad enough, but he felt an extreme sense of revulsion upon realizing he had unknowingly been in the same room with it and breathing the air around it.

Higashikawa did not know at what rate human bodies changed after death, but he doubted the one in the center of this room was only two or three days old. The body wrapped in a kimono had grown both blue and black. The area around the "wounds" was the worst. Small white bugs were wriggling around inside.

The body had been decapitated.

That brought a single image to Higashikawa's mind.

"A guillotine…" he muttered. And then he grew convinced. "She was in one of those attractions. One of the victims was a woman wearing a kimono!!"

"Well done. So do you understand now that we are real?" said the female voice coming from the speaker on the wall.

Technically, it was possible the videos of the attraction had been fake and someone had later created a new corpse to match.

But that made little difference

Either way, these were people willing to kill someone for whatever they were after.

"I'm sure you have figured it out by now, but our purpose here was not to have you monitor those attractions. We can always score an attraction carried out in the past ourselves. That was just preparation. It was like bringing out the ingredients needed before cooking. Those were the ingredients needed for you to participate in the final attraction. If you do not understand, that is fine. Our objective always lies ahead! We are always moving forward!" The female voice spoke very cheerfully. "And that means our real purpose begins here !! We will be making new additions to the attraction archive and we would like your help!!"

"…"

New additions to the attraction archive.

Even though he knew what that meant, Higashikawa felt an intense refusal to come to that conclusion.

But he could think of no other explanation.

Higashikawa Mamoru himself would become part of those videos.

He had been called here to be a performer in a new video for their archive.

In other words…

A life-or-death attraction similar to the ones he had seen would soon begin.

"One quick note," said the female voice. "You are not allowed to call for a temporary timeout or to give up partway through. In fact, the attraction began the moment you woke up."

"Wait a second. Wait a second!! What are the rules of this attraction!? I wasn't told anything!!"

Higashikawa Mamoru of course had no intention of taking part in such a ridiculous attraction.

But he still needed to know the rules so he did not step on a landmine in his search for a way out.

After all, these were games with human lives on the line.

The ugly corpse in the center of the room told him all too well that the organizers really did have the ability to take his life.

However…

"Oh, the rules? Yes, the rules. This is a proper attraction, so it of course has strictly defined rules," said the woman halfheartedly. "But I have no obligation to explain them to you."

"What…?"

Higashikawa Mamoru felt his mind freeze for an instant.

To survive, he had to build up an understanding of all the small details of the situation, but the very bottom of

the pyramid had just been pulled out from underneath him.

But the organizer woman merely said, “After all, we are the ones running the attraction. As long as we understand the rules, the attraction can continue. You don’t need to know them. If you achieve victory according to those rules, we will of course let you leave. So do your best!”

Higashikawa did not understand.

He was in a situation so severe the slightest misstep could get him decapitated, but he was being told to grope around blindly without any knowledge of what qualified as a “misstep”.

There was no way he could do anything in that situation.

He did not even know if he had to leave the room before a time limit ran out or if he would fail if he carelessly left the room. He was simply being asked to choose.

Higashikawa’s entire body began trembling ominously .

This was not due to the mental shock of external factors such as being locked in a dark room or being shown that shocking corpse.

This came from within.

Fear was flowing out from the very core of his heart.

Other than the corpse, the square room was completely normal. Yet in Higashikawa's mental image, it was covered with countless landmines. He was afraid that taking a single step or even breathing too deeply would activate one of those landmines.

He felt completely bound.

While Higashikawa sat motionless and unable to move a single fingertip, the woman spoke once more through the speaker.

"Just so you know, the countdown has already begun."

"What? What countdown!?"

"Here's a freebie."

His answer came immediately afterwards.

He heard a slight clunking noise. The cheap wall clock located just under the speaker had fallen to the ground. The clock face was pointed down, so Higashikawa could now see the reverse side.

Something was attached to it.

That cylindrical something had colorful wires and a small circuit board attached, making it very, very obvious what it was. A clear liquid filled the transparent cylindrical container, but it was obviously not water.

It was a bomb.

Higashikawa felt like the ticking of the clock had suddenly grown much faster.

An unpleasant sweat poured from his body as he heard the female voice over the speaker once more.

“The attraction has already begun. The method is up to you. Someone please do something about your situation.”

Reaper Game 01: Decision

Part 1

Higashikawa Mamoru hurriedly stood up. He ignored the corpse and the bomb and ran over to the room's only exit.

It was an extremely thick steel door.

But it would not open no matter how much he pushed or pulled. He kicked it and rammed his shoulder into it, but it showed no sign of breaking. It seemed to be very sturdily built and it was tightly locked. He spotted a keyhole near the doorknob. The design gave off a different impression from the keyhole to a house.

"A key?" muttered Higashikawa as he looked around. "I need to find the key. Is that what this attraction is?"

No response came from the speaker.

Higashikawa looked around the room. The square space had no furniture or equipment. No matter how small the key was, he should have found it immediately

as there was nowhere to hide it. Yet it was not there. He could not find it. Was there simply no key in the room? Or…

(If it's hidden…)

Higashikawa looked over at the wall clock that had fallen to the floor. The clock had been turned into a time bomb with an unknown time limit. The key could be hidden within, but he did not want to carelessly dismantle it.

Higashikawa's impression of bombs came from movies and dramas, but he was fairly certain that real bombs would explode if you messed with them just like in fiction.

But on the other hand…

(The bomb was installed on the outside of the clock. Was that because there was no space inside for it?)

And the parts on the outside such as the circuit board and the bomb itself were completely exposed. They were not hidden within a box. He could see nothing in which a

key could be hidden. The cylindrical container with the liquid explosive inside was transparent, so he would have been able to see a key hidden within.

It was not in the clock.

Where else could the key be hidden?

Where could a small key be hidden in that almost entirely empty room?

"…You're kidding me."

After looking around the room again, Higashikawa's expression stiffened.

There was something he had been trying to keep his mind off of.

It was sitting in the middle of the room.

The corpse of the woman in a kimono.

It was true a key could be hidden on that.

"…"

He hesitated to approach.

If this was the remains of a relative who had lived to a ripe old age and died of natural causes and it had been properly prepared for a funeral, he might have been able to tearfully see her off to her grave.

However, the object in the center of the room was clearly different.

The woman in the kimono had been killed in an abnormal way so she was missing her head and hands. And it seemed a few days had passed since her death, so this had transformed into something no normal person would think of as “human”. The corpse seemed to be radiating the invisible concept of “death”. He felt he would be enveloped by that “death” if he carelessly approached.

But he had to check.

A time bomb that could explode at any time had been put in the room. And he had been thrown inside with it.

He had no idea how powerful the bomb was, but he doubted it would be survivable from within the room if it was one of their penalties.

He guessed the blast would envelop the entire room at least.

He had to find the key to the door before that happened. He had to search every spot it could be in.

"Dammit…"

With every step he took, the urge to vomit grew. His feet grew unsteady beneath him. He felt as if he was walking on a ship. His gaze was fixed on the corpse's neck wound.

The ten steps it took felt like hell.

But he eventually made it to the corpse.

He crouched down.

Approaching it and touching it were two different things. This was an even higher hurdle. But he had to do it. Higashikawa grabbed the cloth of the kimono and flipped over the corpse.

He found a silver key. Tears welled up in his eyes. But something was wrong. The key did not have the proper jagged teeth.

This was a blank key. Trying it in the door would only waste time and could even destroy the keyhole

He rolled the corpse back onto its back and stared at the kimono. Unlike western clothes, the kimono technically had no pockets. However, a key could still be hidden in the clothes.

This was a woman's corpse with no head or hands.

He felt an intense rejection towards the idea of sticking his hand inside the kimono.

"Uuh…"

Even so, Higashikawa was urged on by the ticking of the time bomb.

He reached out a trembling hand.

He first reached inside the corpse's right sleeve. He felt a sticky sensation and his urge to vomit doubled. Was

this blood from the severed hand or had the woman's skin started to liquefy like a green onion? Higashikawa did not know much about the decomposition process and he was afraid to think about it too much.

He then felt a hard key.

But when he pulled his hand back out from the kimono's sleeve, he was holding another blank key. Something brown and wet covered his fingertips. A sharp odor reached his nose. He thought he was going to cry. But he also felt like his mind would completely break if he stopped working now. While thinking as little as possible, Higashikawa continued his work.

He reached his hand into various parts of the kimono, but found nothing but more blank keys.

He had gone so far and yet it had all been a waste.

He suddenly started to wonder if there was any need to continue the search for the real key.

Could he perhaps dig through the wall with the blank keys? He did not need to open up large enough a hole to

pass through. He just had to dig around the bolts holding the door frame in place. Then he could pull the entire door down.

But…

He continued his search for the real key. Would the enemy allow him to ignore the proper method and force his way out? They were the same people who had prepared this corpse.

If he did not find the real key, he would be blown away by the bomb.

The extreme situation felt as if it would destroy his stomach, but then a thought struck Higashikawa.

He realized where the key could still be hidden.

He thought of a location.

"…"

With almost no expression left on his face, Higashikawa Mamoru looked toward that location.

He looked back toward the kimono-wearing woman's corpse.

However, he did not think they key was hidden in her clothes.

He had to search deeper.

There was a much crueler hiding spot.

In other words…

The key could be inside the corpse.

It could have been embedded inside it somewhere.

"You're kidding me…"

Higashikawa shook his head at the very idea he had come up with himself.

He wanted to deny it.

But with the organizers who had thought up and carried those attractions, it seemed likely.

"You're kidding me!!"

Higashikawa shouted, forcibly encouraged himself, and then began poking down at the surface of the kimono-wearing woman's corpse. He was pressing down almost hard enough for his finger to sink into the decomposing skin. If a key was located under the skin, he thought he would feel a hard lump.

But he could not tell.

He was not sure.

Just pressing down with a single finger was not enough to know if a key was there or not.

Which meant…

He had no choice but to actually cut the corpse open and check.

"……
……
……
……"

As Higashikawa imagined it in his head, he rolled over onto the floor.

And he cried out.

“Aaaahhhhhhhhh!!
Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh
!!”

He felt like his entire stomach was going to come out his mouth. He pointlessly swung his arms and legs around. Tears poured from his eyes and his vision blurred. He felt an unpleasant crawling feeling on his palms.

Was he going to do it?

Did he really have to do it?

Whether alive or dead, a human was a human. That bluish black corpse that he had felt so repelled by now brought the word “human” into Higashikawa’s mind. He would be slicing it open. He would be looking inside. Those actions felt like desecration.

But time continued on.

If he did not want to die in the explosion, he had to try out every possibility that came to his mind.

He wiped away his tears and looked around.

Something was glittering on the ground near the clock that had fallen to the floor. They were sharply pointed glass shards. The glass that had protected the face of the clock had shattered from the fall.

He could use one of those sharp fragments as a blade.

“Uuh…kh…”

Higashikawa slowly stood back up.

He did not want to die.

He did not want to be blown into as many pieces as logic and common sense had been.

He moved across the room to grab the largest of the glass shards and then faced the kimono-wearing corpse once more. He gulped audibly. He had to cut it open, take out the contents, and examine them all. That was his unavoidable path if he was to attempt every possibility for survival.

He crouched down.

He removed the kimono from the corpse's chest.

What lay below was more horrible than he had thought. For an instant, his vision darkened and stomach acid rose in his throat, but he somehow managed to endure. He focused intently on the glass shard he held between the fingers of his right hand. He brought it down to the corpse's unmoving chest.

He pressed down.

The transparent shard sank down about 5 millimeters and Higashikawa forcefully shook his head.

It was too late to bring a hand to his mouth.

"Geh!! Ugeehhh!! Gbggh!! Gbh!!"

He felt like his stomach had suddenly become directly attached to his mouth. Like water flowing back up through a pipe, vomit spewed out across the floor.

Most of his heart cried out that he had had enough.

But he would not survive if he took the easy path. He would meet a similar fate to this corpse. And being blown to pieces by a bomb had to be even more horrible than being decapitated by a guillotine.

Higashikawa grabbed the glass shard once more.

He placed it against the center of the kimono-wearing woman's body and pressed his weight down on it. After making sure the tip had sunk in, he felt like intense static was running through his mind. He was overcome by dizziness as he pulled the glass shard down to the woman's navel.

This was different than cutting a piece of paper with a utility knife.

He continually felt the shard catch as he worked his way down.

Because the woman had died several days before, she did not bleed much. Instead, something more black than red seeped out. The sour smell spread further. He realized anew that her insides were rotting.

Higashikawa's heart had already numbed over.

He had imagined it as being like opening up a pair of double-doors, but it was not that neat. The end result was more like the slit to a disposable package of tissues. He could not see the insides from the outside. With his head wobbling, he moved both hands and stuck his fingertips into the vertical slit he had opened up.

He felt a horribly soft and squishy sensation.

He felt around primarily in the center of the upper body where her stomach would be, but only found a blank key.

She had not been made to swallow the real key.

That meant it had been surgically embedded somewhere else.

He would have to cut her open and search everywhere from her back to the ends of her arms and legs.

Higashikawa's breathing grew erratic and he felt oxygen deprived even in that room filled with air.

He pressed the tip of the glass shard against the corpse 's right arm and cut it open.

He felt something hard near the elbow.

He stuck his fingertips into the wound and tried to pull it out, but he could not.

It was not a key. When Higashikawa realized the protrusion was white, he vomited for the second time.

Even so, he had no choice but to continue the work.

This was no time for showing respect to the dead.

He found bloody blank key after bloody blank key. It was possible a limit was set on the number of times he could look, but it was not worth thinking about now. As the woman's corpse slowly lost its general form, Higashikawa Mamoru finally found something made of a gold metal in the woman's right thigh.

The object covered in something sticky that was both red and black turned out to be a real key with teeth.

He tossed aside the glass shard.

Not even the standard idea of wiping off his dirty hands entered his mind.

"…"

He walked unsteadily toward the steel door. He could think of nothing crueler than this key not fitting the keyhole, but fortunately the organizers had not gone that far.

The key entered the keyhole.

It turned.

Whatever the doorknob had been catching on was gone. The door easily opened.

He practically fell out of the room.

Higashikawa Mamoru gave several shallow breaths to try to take in oxygen while lying on the floor soaked in sweat.

Part 2

Higashikawa Mamoru found himself in a narrow passageway.

Five identical steel doors were lined up along it.

He could not tell if they led to identical square rooms or if they led to the building's exit.

"Dammit…"

Higashikawa brought his hands to the steel door he had left through and slammed it shut half in desperation. He did not know if that would be enough to stop the blast, so he walked backwards away from the door. He felt a chill as he thought about if he had decided to destroy the doorframe without using the real key. His back reached the wall and he slid down to a sitting position.

"Dammit!! I survived. I survived!! Was that the attraction, you bastards!?"

He put all his strength into shouting, but received no response.

But then…

One of the other five steel doors opened. A man with a slight beard and wearing a bloody work uniform came out.

Intense anger and wariness welled up within Higashikawa.

The man must have sensed something in Higashikawa 's eyes because he frantically shouted, "W-wait! Wait!! I' m a participant too!!"

Higashikawa finally realized something thanks to that shout.

He looked down at himself.

He was covered in just as much blood as the man in the work uniform. Dirtying his clothes had been unavoidable while searching for the key embedded in the corpse.

Still sitting on the floor, Higashikawa looked up at the man.

"…Did you do the monitoring too?"

"Yes. And now I had to find goddamn key in a corpse' s thigh. I'm Kazakami. How about you?"

"Higashikawa," he replied quickly before finally taking a deep breath. "Sorry."

"It's fine. You showed plenty of restraint in not running at me."

The man named Kazakami tried to wipe sweat from his face but then realized his hands were still covered in blood. He grimaced.

"Attraction Land is a world famous amusement park, so I thought nothing shady would be going on here. … And yet this is what I find. How insane can this get?"

"Hey, about that…"

Just as Higashikawa began to speak, two more of the five steel doors opened. From one came a woman in a suit who looked like a coldhearted career woman and from the other came a high school aged girl in a school uniform.

Their clothes were bloody too.

It seemed everyone had had a corpse to deal with.

The career woman said she was Hiyama and the high school girl said she was Matsumi.

After they had all exchanged names, Higashikawa returned to the topic at hand.

“This was supposed to be a job with Attraction Land, but do we really know they’re involved in this at all? It’s a famous amusement park, so maybe someone was just using the name.”

"Yes, I doubt an international corporation would be involved in such risky games. Perhaps someone was using the large grounds without permission." The blood on her hands must have bothered her because Hiyama scraped them up against the wall again and again. "For one thing, a company making that much money would have no need to be involved in anything so dangerous."

"That's right," agreed the high school girl named Matsumi. "But where did the other participants go? If I recall, there were thirty or forty people watching those videos."

There were only 5 doors.

If only one participant had been locked inside each one , it did not add up.

Were the others involved in their own attractions elsewhere?

Or…

Had those attractions already been completed?

The man in the work uniform, Kazakami, searched through his pockets.

“Hey, does anyone have a cell phone. I want to call the police.”

“Mine was taken,” said Matsumi.

Higashikawa and Hiyama shook their heads.

The organizers had likely confiscated them in preparation for the attractions.

“That isn’t good. They can get our personal information from the phones’ memory.”

“Wait a second!! So this group of psychos will know our addresses and our friends’ phone numbers!?”

“Just escaping will not be enough.” Hiyama let out a quick sigh. “And if those videos were all real, these organizers kill people for fun on a daily basis. They must have a system in place to escape the police even if they are reported. I have no idea what that might be though.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?” asked Kazakami.

Hiyama glared lightly at him and said, “But there is plenty of evidence of their crimes here. If we can gather enough information to prove what sorts of attractions are carried out here… Well, having them all arrested would be best, but even if we can’t manage that, we might be able to hold them in check so they cannot go after us anymore.”

“Wait. Are you saying we head deeper into this instead of running away?” frantically cut in Kazakami. “ Will that really work!? That’s like heading deep into the forest yourself. It’s suicide!”

“Then what do you say we do? We can assume they have our personal information from our phones. Escaping here does us no good if they can simply target our homes.”

“I don’t know what we can do about that, but escaping here comes first. We can always just abandon our homes. We could run away to some tropical island.”

The high school girl named Matsumi shook her head.

“If we had the money for that, we wouldn’t have come for this job in the first place.”

"We can just go to some really cheap country! We can manage to live comfortably enough for a while."

Despite Kazakami's vigorous explanation, it simply did not sound realistic. And that was likely especially true for Matsumi who was still supported by her parents. A minor like her could not choose to abandon the country.

Not that Higashikawa Mamoru's situation was much different.

"Hey," said Hiyama as if she had suddenly realized something.

Higashikawa looked over to find her looking at one of the five steel doors.

"Does anyone know when the time bombs will explode?"

"No." Matsumi shook her head. "None of the attraction's rules were explained to me."

"Why do you ask?"

"Well…" Hiyama pointed a slender finger toward the door she had been looking at. "That door is the only door that hasn't opened yet. I have no idea when the bomb explodes, but doesn't the person in there need to get out as soon as possible?"

"…"

They all turned to look at the unopened door.

Kazakami spoke up as if to shake off a bad feeling.

"Well, we don't actually know every single door has a participant inside. That door might lead out of the building."

"But…"

What if someone was locked in there with a bomb?

What if they had not realized the key was in the corpse ?

Or what if they knew where the key was but did not have the courage to take it out?

Higashikawa, Matsumi, Kazakami, and Hiyama.

Those four had made the decision to survive. But that did not mean everyone would make the same decision in the same situation.

“Hey…”

The next thing he knew, Higashikawa was calling out toward that door.

No one tried to stop him.

Higashikawa stood up and ran over to the steel door. He frantically pounded his fists on the door and shouted into the room.

“Hey!! Is there someone in there!? Did you give up when you kept finding blank keys? You know where the real key is, right? This is no time to hesitate!! Hurry up and get out of there!!”

He tried to turn the doorknob, but as expected, it was locked and would not budge. Trying to kick it down would be useless.

Meanwhile, a frail female voice came from the other side of the door.

Higashikawa could not tell if the voice was really that quiet or if it was only being muffled by the thick door.

"…I cannot."

"You can't what!?"

"I cannot do it. I cannot… That is…that is…"

"Dammit," cursed Higashikawa through clenched teeth.

If the person inside did not cut up the corpse and get out the key, she could not leave the room. If she did not leave, she would eventually be blown to pieces by the time bomb.

The woman inside knew that yet could not choose to do it.

Higashikawa did not think she was simply refusing to look at reality or being indecisive. He saw something incredibly bright in her.

But it was all over if she did not do it.

That bright thing had been completely normal not long before and yet now it was too much to even look directly at. And it would soon be destroyed in an explosion.

Higashikawa pounded his fists on the steel door and shouted, “Come out!! Get out of there!! This is no time to be idealistic! We were forced to do this. We aren’t the ones at fault here!!”

“But…but…”

“The real key is in the corpse’s right thigh. You don’t have to open up a very large hole. You only have to make a small cut! Hurry up and do it!!”

“…I cannot do it. I cannot live like this. I do not want to survive badly enough to do something like this. Do not worry about me. At least work to survive yourself…”

Higashikawa felt an intense heat surge through his stomach.

This was not confusion or fear over the unreasonable situation he had been thrown into.

It was anger.

It was anger toward the organizers who enjoyed creating these cruel situations they called attractions. He felt fierce anger when he thought about them rejoicing as they trampled goodness and reason underfoot.

He had no idea who this woman on the other side of the door was.

Focusing on one's own moderation and "dropping out " of one's own free will may have been a different option a human could take. That decision may have been much more respectable than Higashikawa and the others' decisions to slice open someone else to save themselves.

But he could not allow it.

Someone that decent could not be allowed to die in such an unreasonable and nonsensical way.

"…You can't do that."

"What do you mean?"

"No matter how noble your choice may be, the organizers will only rejoice when they see it! They will be

clapping their hands together and laughing their asses off in some comfortable room!! I can't let that happen. There is only one way to make those fucked-up organizers cry and your decision here will ruin it!!"

"What…way is that? These organizers have created such an elaborate setting to mess with us while ensuring they will never be harmed. I do not see how we can fight back. And even if we can, do not worry about me. You can head down that path yourself."

"I need your help for the method I'm thinking of."

The organizers had overwhelming power.

They were absolute existences who used human beings like game pieces.

If there truly was a method of frustrating those unknown people, it had to be to…

"Every single one of us must survive this. That is the only way to defeat the organizers!!"

A slight silence followed.

Higashikawa continued on.

"So don't die here! Don't end this!! That is not the path you chose. That is the ending prepared by the organizers and it is the ending they are eager to see!! So survive this! Survive by any means necessary!!"

"…"

"…Please."

Higashikawa seemed to squeeze out that last word.

Setting aside whether the person had been alive or dead, he had cut open a human being. He did not want to put anyone else through that experience nor did he want anyone to be treated in the same fashion after their death.

They would live on and go home.

That seemed like a terribly obvious thing, but it seemed horribly unrealistic here.

But he spoke once more.

"Please!! We're at our limit. We can't accept people's deaths again and again! If you die, something will break within us. So please…please! Don't show us that again!!"

He received no response.

He could hear nothing at all through the door.

Had he not been able to reach her?

Thinking he had not, Higashikawa leaned up against the door.

But then…

He heard a hard clicking noise from the steel door.

It was the sound of a key turning.

"Uuh…kh…"

He heard someone groaning through as the door cracked open.

A foreign-looking woman with blonde hair and blue eyes exited. She appeared to be about college age. Her clothes were covered in dark red blood and she had tears and snot covering her face.

“
Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuhhhhhh
!!”

The blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman looked at Higashikawa and the other participants in the passageway before collapsing to the floor. She covered her face with hands covered in someone else’s blood and began sobbing.

She had made a decision and lost something bright within her.

But she had survived.

Higashikawa dragged her fully out into the passageway and shut the steel door.

Not even 10 minutes later, an explosive noise stabbed into their ears.

Despite how thick the steel doors were, all five of them bulged out quite a bit. If even one of them had not been closed or if any one of the participants had escaped without using the proper key, everyone in the passageway would have been smashed to pieces by the

blast. The giant mass of violent noise was enough to tell them that.

For a while, the five of them stared at the warped doors.

For the moment, they had made no sacrifices.

It took a full three minutes before that hit home.

"…It's over," muttered Higashikawa blankly. "It's over."

"Yes," agreed the career woman named Hiyama. "But what is over?"

"…"

They had definitely cleared one attraction. But they had no idea where they were and there did not seem to be an exit. Even if they managed to escape, they had no guarantee the organizers would not pursue them. In other words, their safety was in no way ensured.

The man in the work uniform named Kazakami cut in to say, "I kinda liked the sound of that."

"?"

"That thing about the only way to defeat the organizers."

"I agree," said the high school girl named Matsumi. "I don't know if even our best efforts will be enough, but having a goal like that is a good idea. Having everyone survive is our way of opposing the organizers."

"…"

The blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman looked up at Higashikawa from the floor.

He did not know what to say.

Finally, he breathed a sigh of relief and simply said the words that came to mind.

"Then let's go and find a way to survive."

The five began moving.

The second attraction was sure to begin soon.

Progress Report #201

Checking current criminal charges of each participant.

The parameters for each participant in Player 1 are as follows:

Higashikawa Mamoru.

Viewing of and assisting in the production of snuff films.

Mutilating a corpse and instigating the same.

Hiyama Tomoko.

Viewing of and assisting in the production of snuff films.

Mutilating a corpse.

Kazakami Shinzou.

Viewing of and assisting in the production of snuff films.

Mutilating a corpse.

Matsumi Shirauo

Viewing of and assisting in the production of snuff films.

Mutilating a corpse.

Rachel Skydance

Viewing of and assisting in the production of snuff films.

Mutilating a corpse. (Unclear if she would have done so on her own.)

Each participant has been successfully given criminal charges suitable to the organization's objective.

As they have satisfied the requirements, the plan shall continue centered on Player 1.

Reaper Game 02: Setup

Part 1

It seemed the blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman was named Rachel.

She attended a junior college in the city and had found out about the monitoring through a help wanted section in the newspaper.

But the high school girl named Matsumi did not have it in her to focus on each of their individual situations.

"…Hey, the wall has crumbled here," said the man in the work uniform named Kazakami.

He was peering into one of the five rooms the time bombs had detonated in.

Either the shock had been too great or it had been set up that way from the beginning because one entire wall had crumbled leading to another space beyond.

Hiyama in her showy suit and Rachel with her skin too white to be Japanese leaned over to peer into the room.

(He settled that quite well.)

Matsumi was focusing on a single participant out of the other four.

He had given the name Higashikawa.

He appeared to be about college age. It may have been due to the extreme situation or he may have always been that way, but his expression did not seem to change much.

He had said every single one of them needed to survive in order to get back at the organizers.

It was an excellent goal.

And as a fellow participant, Matsumi had no real reason to reject it.

And on top of that…

(The bonds of a group are often strengthened by finding the odd man out and attacking him.)

As a high school girl, Matsumi knew that process quite well. That problem weighed down on anyone in the confined area known as school life.

(Normally, that odd man out has to be kicked out of the group first. Once he is not part of the group, the situation will not grow violent so easily.)

For example, say a nearby school is seen as a rival in an upcoming mock examination or club competition. A competition between the regulars of a school will unavoidably grow into a mess on the surface and behind the scenes. However, when the scope is expanded beyond the school, the competition can amazingly be carried out in a pure fashion.

Defusing that delicate situation had taken quite a lot of skill.

Although Matsumi was not sure if Higashikawa was aware of the situation he had created or not.

(Anyway…)

Matsumi switched over her train of thought.

She could not deny that she wanted to seize the initiative in the conversation, but forcing herself into an already settled situation would only cause unnecessary problems.

She double checked where she stood.

If she was going to give up on remaining neutral, she would need to focus on not being pushed outside the group.

She did not fully agree with Higashikawa's view and she was not prepared to remain with the other four to the very brink of death. But her sense for how to remain within a delicate group told her she must not let them realize that.

They had already been united into a group opposing the organizers. If she said she would prefer to act on her own discretion, she could easily be seen as disrupting the harmony of the group. In the worst case, she could even be labeled an ally of the organizers.

She glanced over at Hiyama and Rachel, the other women.

On the surface, they seemed to agree, but had they truly not realized the risks? Or had they and they were simply making sure no one noticed just like Matsumi was?

She could not tell what they were truly thinking.

They had officially united as a single group, so the others might begin suspecting her if they thought she was trying to sound out the others.

“What are you doing?” asked Higashikawa, the one who had set up the situation.

While using her facial muscles to create a harmless-looking smile, Matsumi replied, “Wait. I’m coming.”

She then passed through the steel door that had been warped in the explosion and entered the room.

The room had been bare to begin with, but the blast had created cracks in the walls and the ceiling. Small fragments must have rained down because the floor gave an overall impression of being disorderly.

Then again…

One major factor behind that impression may have been the corpse that had been blown to pieces and scattered across the floor and walls.

Matsumi did her best not to look at that.

The main issue was the back wall.

Unlike the rest of the room, the entire wall had crumbled. Another area continued on beyond it. It was a long passageway. The linoleum floor was covered mostly in a cold darkness and was eerily lit by an emergency exit.

This was not the same as a school.

It seemed more sterile yet gave off a strong impression of death.

Yes.

"This looks like a hospital," muttered Matsumi.

As no one gave a differing opinion, it seemed they all felt the same.

The five moved further in.

This passageway had a window. The darkness outside made it clear it was night. But it would prove difficult to leave through the window. They appeared to be over 10 stories up.

And…

"What the hell? Metal bars?" said the man with a slight beard and a work uniform.

Yes.

Several thick steel bars were welded to the inside of the window. They did not provide enough room to squeeze through and they looked too sturdy to remove. Plus, they could be booby-trapped with a bomb or high voltage current.

The metal bars over the window were partially there to keep anyone from leaving, but they also gave off a sense of humiliation like they were trapped in a cage at the zoo.

Hiyama pointed down the passageway.

"Hey, I see some more bars up ahead."

"…What?"

"Is this a mental hospital?"

Hospitals equipped with metal bars would occasionally show up in movies or dramas. However, a high school girl like Matsumi had no idea if real mental hospitals were equipped with such inhumane bars.

However, it brought a certain image to mind.

She recalled a certain term that had recently been all over the tabloid headlines and the hanging advertisements on trains.

"…Is this that Hell Hospital?"

"Ugeh!? Not that…" groaned Kazakami with a visibly displeased look.

However, he had to be thinking something else as well :

That was an idea the organizers of these deadly attractions would find absolutely mouthwatering.

Higashikawa wiped sweat from his brow and said, " What was that again? Some kind of facility that took in children who refused to go to school and claimed to help them return to society? But they were actually thrown into a hospital filled with metal bars and put through torturous rehabilitation, right? They ignored the kids' personal situations and assumed they had dropped out due to an immature mind."

"An expert medical institution backed them, so the kids' parents did not suspect a thing. I heard that by the time the authorities realized what was going on, the group had become so utterly twisted that they insisted the children were simply sleeping even though they had been mummified in their beds. I wonder how much of that was true."

Matsumi only had the information from tabloids, but one theory said the children who made mistakes would be given a special punishment in which they were dragged to the operating room, had their skulls opened up, and received a lobotomy.

She had no idea how much of it was true, but it had been on a large enough scale to leave its mark on the history of Japanese crime.

And since it seemed like a cult linked to medicine, it was also said the health food and diet booms had helped instigate it.

However…

"We have no way of knowing if this is the real Hell Hospital," said Higashikawa. "We saw a lot of different stages in those attraction videos. This could be a building the organizers created to resemble the Hell Hospital for their twisted purposes."

"That's right." Kazakami looked back out through the barred window. "I can't see the lights of a city outside. And is that the sea in the distance?"

They could only see in the one direction, so they could not be certain if they were on the coast or on an island. That difference would greatly change what they had to do after escaping the building.

At any rate, they had to keep moving, so they continued on.

However, they found more metal bars not even 20 meters down the passageway. A small door someone could pass through was installed, but it was of course locked.

Higashikawa stared at the small door.

“I guess it won’t be that easy.”

“But there was only one path here. Is there a key hidden somewhere in the passageway like in the rooms or were five different passageways meant to open up in the explosions?”

“Hey, look,” said Kazakami as he pointed at the bars.

Or more accurately, past the bars. The area was too dark to see it immediately, but a small sign had been set up in the middle of the passageway. It resembled the ones used to warn of a wet floor.

But a scrap of notebook paper had been taped to it.

Extremely round writing had been written with a thick permanent marker.

It said: Beware the traitor.

"…"

"…"

"…"

"…"

"…"

An unpleasant silence fell over all of them.

It was a simple sentence. It had no basis and they had no guarantee it was accurate.

But…

(This is bad.)

It did not matter if it was true or not. Seeing that here would cause them to begin to wonder if there was a traitor among them. To put it bluntly, that was information that must not be inputted within them. Once it made its way into their heads, it would remain as a prickling in the corner of their hearts no matter how

much they denied it on the surface. It would sow the seeds of suspicion.

"They're just trying to shake us. It's obvious what the organizers want here," spat out Higashikawa as he averted his gaze from the sign.

Rachel and Kazakami did the same.

"…"

Hiyama stared at the sign for a bit, but finally sighed and did the same as Higashikawa and the others.

Matsumi did not follow anyone in particular's lead, but followed the overall flow of the situation and looked away as well.

Part 2

In truth, Matsumi had no memories.

It had felt similar to when the monitoring had ended midway and she had found herself in a dark room. All she remembered was a dull throbbing pain in her head and the surrounding memories growing vague.

However…

Unlike this time, the gap in her memories had been quite large.

Starting from the moment she had woken up, the gap had stretched back almost 15 years.

That first time, she had woken up inside an empty train.

The long benches on either side of the train had no one else sitting in them. Matsumi seemed to have been sleeping while sitting on the end of one of the benches near the door. When she frowned at the odd headache and tried to look around, she heard a slight noise.

It came from her school bag falling from her lap and to the floor.

Matsumi frantically grabbed the bag, but no one had seen her. The hanging advertisements shaking with the movements of the train displayed the faces of those in charge of the facility nicknamed the Hell Hospital.

She could not remember what subway line she was on or what station she was heading towards.

And that single question quickly made her aware of more and more things she could not remember. Once she realized that included her own address and even her name, Matsumi felt a chill run down her spine. The dull headache made its presence very well known.

In an attempt to control her unstable heart, Matsumi frantically undid the latch of her school bag and rummaged through it.

From the textbooks and notebooks she found, she learned she was a second year high school student.

She began to grow worried when she checked through every pocket and could not find a wallet or subway pass. She checked two or three times but still could not find them. She could tell the monster known as panic was opening its giant maw, but then she felt something on her thigh. She stuck a hand into her skirt and checked the pocket.

She found a sparkling pink wallet made of lamé and a cell phone that reflected light in the same way.

But when she switched on the cell phone, it displayed a password prompt. She of course did not know what that password was, so she could advance no further.

She looked through the wallet.

It also seemed to function as a card case as it held an IC-type subway pass. The surface had the normal stations she travelled between printed on it: Shirasagi to Kusanomine. The first one printed would normally be where her home was, so she guessed her home was in Shirasagi.

She also found a few store point cards with addresses in Shirasagi. The user name given on the cards was Matsumi Shirauo.

(Is that my name?)

Matsumi tilted her head but it did not feel real to her.

She also found a folded photograph inside the wallet. She unfolded it to find someone with her same face smiling between a middle-aged man and a middle-aged woman.

It was a family photo. And using a paper photo in the age of digital cameras seemed like something an old man would insist on. From that, she guessed she got along well with her family and did what her parents wanted.

The wallet also contained a few 1000 yen bills and quite a bit of change. The change pocket also held a key. It may have belonged to her house. It was not one of the uniquely shaped keys that belonged to a bicycle or scooter. She found no receipts. She must have been the type who threw them away at the register.

Nothing in the wallet listed her exact address or phone number.

All of that personal information was likely contained in her cell phone. She had had no reason write it out when it was stored there.

"Shirasagi. We will be stopping at Shirasagi next. Everyone using the Bungaku Line or the Special Coastal Line must switch trains. I repeat: we will be stopping at …"

Matsumi frantically stood up from the bench when she heard the flat voice of that announcement.

The subway train stopped at a station in the tunnel.

She stepped off onto the platform, but it was as oddly deserted as the train.

She knew her home was somewhere in Shirasagi, but she knew nothing more detailed than that. As she wondered what to do, she suddenly recalled the subway pass in her wallet.

She pulled it out again to check and it was indeed the IC card type. It was made so she could pass through the ticket gate just by touching the card to it.

And that meant it had her personal information registered in it.

She followed the arrow on the sign to walk across the platform and to the ticket gate. She used her subway pass to leave the station and approached the automatic ticket machine. She inserted her pass and called up the menu to change the registered information.

Her name, address, and contact information appeared immediately.

It seemed she lived in an apartment rather than a house.

But before she could feel relieved, Matsumi's expression froze over.

Something she had not expected was listed along with the other personal information.

Her occupation.

Due to what she was wearing, she had assumed that field would simply have "student" entered, but it did not . Something else was written there:

Temporary Employment

Attraction Land Sales Department

Part 3

Due to the metal bars across the passageway, they could not continue on. Could it have been a coincidence that Matsumi and the others had come here? Were all five rooms meant to have a wall crumble to reveal five different passageways?

In the worst case, they would need to head back to the original five rooms and try to destroy the walls, floor, and ceilings of the other four. The five of them turned back and carefully investigated the passageway. The only illumination came from the emergency exit light which was beyond the metal bars.

That was why it took them so long to notice.

It was unclear if the organizers had even intended to hide it.

"Here…" said Rachel in a feeble voice as she felt along the wall overly slowly out of fear of a poisoned needle or some other trap. "Is this a door?"

The others gathered around her.

They felt along the wall too and it did indeed feel odd. It was cold like a sheet of metal. It likely was a door just as Rachel had said.

However, it had no knob.

It was nothing more than a flat metal panel.

"What kind of door is this? How do you open it?"

Kazakami was the one to voice the question all of them were thinking.

Matsumi pushed with both hands, but it would not budge.

"Could this be…?" muttered Higashikawa before crouching down.

He seemed to be feeling around for something in the darkness.

He primarily focused on the floor.

"I was right. There's a switch here. You step on it to open the door."

"Is this for an operating room? I think they make it open with a switch on the floor so the doctor does not dirty his hands," commented Hiyama casually, but then she seemed to realize the weight of the words she had just said.

A great tension ran through the darkness.

The Hell Hospital had partially earned its name due to what went on in the operating rooms.

Children in perfect health had been forcibly dragged in, had their skulls opened, and had their brain operated on for a lobotomy. It was a bloody experimental ground.

Their surroundings did not give an enjoyable impression.

Whether this was the real Hell Hospital or not, the organizers of the attractions would feel the strongest attachment to and interest in this stage. Unless they were cruel enough to actually betray even that basic assumption, the organizers would have something set up here.

"What do we do?"

"I don't want to go in there any more than you do, but there's nowhere else to go."

"…"

Rachel was too afraid to speak.

Matsumi slowly opened her mouth to speak in order not to provide too much of a stimulus.

"The odds are good this is some kind of trap or the next attraction. We need to be careful."

Matsumi heard the sound of scraping metal.

Higashikawa must have pressed the button near the door.

The double doors opened inwards. In the next moment , the bright fluorescent lights of an operating room lit up. They were left momentarily blinded.

Matsumi instinctually held a hand up to her eyes and managed to maintain some of her vision by squinting.

The area inside was surprisingly large.

The lack of any special equipment may have strengthened that impression. It was about as large as a classroom. The color scheme was entirely made of a light blue and the walls were tiled. The ceiling was about 2 stories high. The walls of the upper floor were covered in glass. New doctors and others could observe the operation from there.

The operating table and a characteristic surgical light were installed in the center of the room. The surgical

light was a device created from many different individual lights.

The two pieces of equipment gave off an impression of being isolated because the operating room was completely empty otherwise.

"What…?" said Higashikawa as he entered the operating room.

Matsumi and Rachel followed his lead and walked in after him side by side.

And suddenly, a series of loud musical tones played.

"…Oh, was that too loud? My bad, my bad," said an equally loud voice.

The great noise brought them all to a stop.

The door to the operating room slammed shut behind Matsumi. Hiyama and Kazakami were still out in the passageway. Rachel frantically ran over to the door, but it would not budge no matter how much she pushed and pulled.

There was a foot button on the floor near the door, but nothing happened when Rachel tried it.

"I-It will not open!!"

They could hear someone pounding on the door from outside.

Kazakami's voice shouted, "Hey, what happened!? Are you holding it shut!? This button just opened the door, right!?"

"…"

Matsumi silently looked around the operating room and spotted a speaker near the ceiling.

A female voice said, "I thought you would all give up, but it seems you are a surprisingly greedy bunch. That means it is time to begin the 2nd attraction. If you clear it, you will be given the key to those metal bars. If you fail, the door to the operating room will never open again."

A high-pitched noise exploded out.

It came from the upper floor.

The glass protecting the observation space had shattered. Not much rained down, but Matsumi and Higashikawa jumped back as far as they could whether it was actually falling toward them or not. Rachel was slower to react, so Matsumi ran into her and they fell to the ground.

A woman stood in the space above.

It seemed she had broken the glass with a chair. She threw four objects about the size of landline phone receivers through the hole that was too large to call a gap .

Some landed on the surgical table and some missed and fell to the floor.

Higashikawa's body stiffened in shock when he saw them.

Matsumi did not want to look toward them.

But before she could, the woman who had broken the glass spoke.

"Two of the handguns hold a real bullet and two hold only blanks. Two of you will participate. Each participant

must choose whichever two of the handguns they want, aim the guns at each other, and pull one of their two triggers when I give the sign. It's quite a simple attraction ."

"You're insane!!!!!!" shouted Higashikawa without thinking.

At first glance, it seemed this was a decent reaction, but Matsumi felt the organizers would only rejoice at the outburst of impotent rage. The woman might have been purposefully provoking them, but that might also be too farfetched.

"By the way, the guns have laser pointers attached, so we will know if you try to aim away. Make sure to aim at the center of the other's face before pulling the trigger."

For an instant, Rachel's gaze moved between the handgun and the woman on the upper floor.

She may have been considering taking the gun and shooting the woman.

But Matsumi doubted it would work. It was the organizers who had prepared the guns. They would have countermeasures prepared to keep them from being used against them.

Matsumi looked up at the upper floor.

This woman claimed to be a fulltime employee of Attraction Land.

But Matsumi had never had a proper conversation with those fulltime employees. It was unknown what the woman's purpose was in throwing her into this situation. It was unclear if the woman even viewed Matsumi as on the same side as her.

The woman then clearly met Matsumi's gaze.

And she smiled.

Then she announced, "The two who will take part in this attraction are the following: Matsuuumiii Shiraaaauoooooo!! Raacheeeeellll Skyyyyyydaaaaaaance!!"

"Ee!!"

Rachel let out a voice like a hiccup as her entire body stiffened.

Matsumi silently gritted her teeth. If the explosions had opened a different path, would a less cruel fate have awaited them? However, thinking on possibilities that may never have existed would not help.

“A catfight like this can only be seen tonight!! The feigned innocence of these girls is likely to come crumbling down, so I hope you’re prepared to be disillusioned, boy!! Now, let us begin. Both of you must choose two of these handguns!!”

“No!” frantically shouted Higashikawa to stop the designated girls.

He may have forgotten the simple fact that a raised voice would wear at people’s nerves in an extreme situation regardless of the intent behind it. Or perhaps he had not forgotten and was doing it purposefully.

“They’ll do anything to enjoy this. They’ll never keep their promise. They probably all have a real bullet inside so they can laugh at the idiots who honestly take the challenge!”

"No, no."

An odd change suddenly came over the voice of the woman on the upper floor.

It grew quieter.

It grew eerily sincere.

"We strictly adhere to the rules and results of the attractions. It does not matter if that leads to a sickening happy ending where you all survive."

Before Matsumi and the others could think on it or analyze it, the woman's voice reverted to the same as before.

"But whether you believe me or not, the attraction is beginning! If you use up all your time, you will all be killed!"

"Shit…" cursed Higashikawa despite having escaped the attraction himself.

Was he cursing his inability to stop his allies from killing each other or was he cursing his own relief over having escaped?

"If you have not made your preparations within 10 minutes, you will be killed. Tah dah!! I have a beer case full of Molotov cocktails prepared. …Hm? You can't see them from down there? Well, I'll be tossing a ton of them down there, so I doubt you will be able to escape. The door won't be opening either."

"Shit!!"

Higashikawa was the first one to act.

Matsumi followed suit and approached the four handguns scattered near the operating table in the center. Rachel sat on the floor with her face absolutely pale and remained perfectly motionless.

"We have to check," muttered Matsumi more to herself than anyone else. And then she shouted out because that encouragement had immediately failed. " We have to find some way to tell which ones have a real bullet and which ones have a blank! If we know how to tell, we will automatically know if the rules are fair and how to safely clear this attraction!!"

All of the handguns were revolvers.

"If we can determine which handguns have blanks, we can clear this attraction with no one dying."

Matsumi picked up one of the handguns and tried to remove the cartridges, but the cylinder would not open like she had seen in movies.

At first she assumed she simply did not know how to do it, but Higashikawa shook his head after he tried with a different gun.

"It's no good. They've been altered so the cylinder won't open."

"We can't check the cartridges, so we can't tell which ones are real bullets and which ones are blanks!"

They were revolvers, so the cylinder was made to hold six shots in a circular pattern. If the bullet aligned with the barrel was viewed as 12 o'clock, the bullets at 2 o' clock and 10 o'clock could be glimpsed by staring into the holes on the cylinder.

However…

"Dammit, they all look the same."

If they could not check, they could not choose between the four guns.

If they simply chose at random, the odds of no one dying were almost nonexistent. If either of them chose the gun with a real bullet, it was over. And it was possible one of them would end up with both options holding a real bullet.

Given the different patterns, the odds of someone dying were 3/4.

That was three times as high as in Russian roulette.

"Just under seven minutes to go!"

"…"

They could not tell which were real bullets and which were blanks just by looking in from outside.

The odds were too poor to simply choose at random.

There had to be a way.

There had to be some other way of telling apart the four handguns.

"…Wait."

"What?"

"Do you have something like an eraser? And something like a ruler!!"

"How is that going to help? All of the guns are the same model, so measuring their length won't-…"

"Just do it!! I'm not measuring their length!!" shouted Matsumi as she looked over at the operating table in the center of the room. More accurately, she looked at the four legs supporting it. She grabbed one of those square rods and pulled hard.

It was affixed to the table with a screw, so it would not budge.

Matsumi looked to Higashikawa and said, "Help me tear this leg off!!"

"Why? What are you going to use it for?"

"We have a chance if we use it! Hurry!!"

Higashikawa did not hold back any longer.

He circled around to where Matsumi was and held the operating table in place so it would not move. When they worked together, the square rod seemed to slowly bend. But it was actually the screw holding it in place beginning to break.

A high pitched snapping sound rang out.

It had bent a bit, but the leg had come off. The operating table fell over diagonally, but Matsumi did not care.

She took off the leather shoe of her school uniform and placed it on the floor.

She then carefully placed the center of the operating table leg on top.

It was a seesaw.

Or…

"…Scales?"

"Real bullets and blanks don't weigh the same, right? The heavier gun should be the one with a real bullet inside. We can tell them apart by weighing them!!"

"How much time is left!?" shouted Higashikawa toward the upper floor.

The organizer woman replied, "Just under three minutes."

"We can make it," muttered Higashikawa under his breath. His voice then grew louder. "We can make it. We can clear this attraction without anyone dying!!"

Part 4

Meanwhile, Rachel was not watching Matsumi and Higashikawa work as she sat on the operating room floor .

She was looking towards her feet.

She was looking at the gap between her thighs.

Rachel was not simply frozen there out of fear. She had noticed something. Something had been written on the operating room floor with a ballpoint pen. She had sat down so she could read it without the others noticing.

Due to her position, it was hard to read.

But her life could be riding on even the smallest piece of information.

The round writing said the following:

Comparing the weights is an elementary trap, so be careful.

The trick lies in the principle of leverage.

"…Ah."

She accidentally let out a voice and briefly panicked over whether Matsumi or Higashikawa had heard her.

Yes.

The principle of leverage.

Scales only worked when the bar extended equal distances in both directions from the fulcrum in the middle. So what if those distances were not equal?

Moving the fulcrum, which in this case was a leather shoe, would be difficult. With two people working on it, someone would notice the change.

But what about the handguns placed on either end of the bar?

Moving their position by just a few centimeters would be enough to lose all equality. The lighter blank handguns could be made to look heavier. Unlike normal scales, there were no plates. It would not be difficult to casually alter the positions of the handguns slightly.

In other words…

If the person measuring it wanted to, they could change the result to whatever they wanted.

They could create fraudulent results.

They could cheat.

(But they have no reason to do that.)

Rachel reflexively denied that dreadful thought that had come to her mind. The five of them were working together to survive and to ruin the organizers' plans for them. She wanted to rely on that wonderful idea.

But…

Beware the traitor.

There was the sign beyond the metal bars in the Hell Hospital passageway. Its powerful message flashed in the back of her mind. She could not completely deny the possibility. She wanted to but could not.

There was one reason.

There was one reason someone would do that.

(Matsumi-san can give me the two blank handguns and take the two real ones for herself. Then she will survive no matter which gun I choose at the last second. But in that case, the gun fired at me has a 100% chance of being loaded with a real bullet.)

The organizers would be at fault.

They would be seen as having tricked both Matsumi and Rachel.

And so everyone's anger toward the organizers would increase, but Matsumi would not be kicked out of the group. Even if she protected herself by creating a situation that ensured Rachel's death, she could easily deflect the hatred.

"Got it!! The right two have blanks and the left two have real bullets!!"

"Hurry, Rachel-san! Let's finish this before that woman says the time is up and throws those Molotov cocktails down here!!"

She felt like she was hearing the voices of demons.

What should she do?

Rachel thought for a moment and finally stood up slowly. She approached the operating table to ensure the others did not see the small writing on the floor.

As expected, Matsumi grabbed two handguns and held them out towards Rachel.

She was keeping Rachel from making the decision.

"Be careful. The one in your right hand has a blank and the one in your left hand has a real bullet. … Rachel-san, please don't mix them up. Just think of it as shooting with your dominant hand."

"Um…" Rachel slowly spoke up and made a suggestion. "Both of us have one with a real bullet and one with a blank, right? We have the same setup, right?"

"Y-yeah. Why do you ask?"

"Sorry, but could we swap guns? These ones…um… they're kind of dirty."

"Fine, it's the same either way," replied Matsumi as she held the two guns meant for herself out towards Rachel. "The right one is the blank and the left one is the real one. It's the same as before, so don't get it wrong. Fire with your right hand on the signal. Got it?"

"…Y-yes."

After Rachel took the two revolvers, Matsumi grabbed the two she had given to Rachel earlier.

Higashikawa shouted up towards the upper floor.

"We've chosen! How do we begin the attraction!?"

"Matsumi-san and Rachel-san, please move against opposite walls. Press your backs to the walls and aim

your guns at each other. If you press the small button on the grip, the laser pointer will activate. Use that and aim at each other's faces. Failing to do so will get you all killed, so be careful."

"…"

"…"

Matsumi and Rachel followed their instructions and moved to either end of the classroom-sized room.

Rachel's mind was filled with confusion as she pressed her back against the wall.

Matsumi had readily swapped out the guns.

If one set had both blank guns and the other had both real guns, that would have been a fatal move.

Was the idea of a traitor nothing more than seeds of suspicion sown by the organizers? Had Matsumi and Higashikawa both distributed the guns properly? If she did as instructed and fired the gun in her right hand, would they clear the attraction with no one dying?

(But…)

A very bad feeling swelled up in the back of Rachel's mind.

She had found that message written in ballpoint pen on the operating room floor. It had warned of someone cheating using the principle of leverage.

But could she be sure it had been written by the organizers?

In other words…

Rachel stared blankly at the girl wearing a school uniform.

Could Matsumi have written that message on the floor while no one was looking?

Had she intentionally made Rachel suspicious?

Had she lured Rachel into asking to swap out the guns ?

She could have divided the four guns into the two blank ones and the two real ones and then given herself the blanks at first.

Her preparations would be complete once Rachel asked to swap out the guns out of the fear brought on by the message on the floor.

Matsumi could fake the outcomes of the measurements with a trick using the principle of leverage . But that still held some risk of suspicion being turned toward Matsumi once Rachel was killed. After all, Matsumi had suggested using scales, Matsumi had taken the measurements, and Matsumi had handed Rachel the handguns.

But what if Rachel made an irregular request?

If that coincidence was added in…

No one would suspect Matsumi of any ill will. If Rachel had not suggested swapping out the guns, Matsumi would have been the one to die. She moved from the position of perpetrator to the position of victim.

Matsumi had lured Rachel in.

And Rachel had fallen for it.

“Wai-…!!” shouted Rachel frantically, but the organizer woman spoke up to cut her off.

"The 2nd attraction will now begin. I will start the countdown. When I reach zero, each of you is to pull your chosen trigger!!"

A calm smile could be seen on Matsumi's lips.

Was she certain of her victory?

Did she know there was no way she could die?

"Three. Two. One!"

The count continued.

The guns in Rachel's right hand and left hand both felt horribly empty.

She could not win.

No matter which one she shot, she would only be firing a blank. Matsumi had both real guns. The bullet that flew out along the path of the laser pointer would certainly blast straight through Rachel's forehead. Even if she swung her head to the side at the last second and successfully evaded the bullet, the organizers would kill her. Molotov cocktails would rain down from above and the flames would burn Rachel to death.

She could not be saved.

She could not survive.

All five of them surviving was the sole means of defeating the malicious organizers. When Rachel had first heard that, she had been moved, but she had been unable to pull it off. The malice leaking out from each of them had eaten away at that ideal.

(In that case!!)

Rachel gritted her teeth.

She had guns in her right hand and left hand.

She poured all her focus into one of them.

(At the very least, I do not want to end this as a mere puppet!!)

“Zero!!”

The sounds of two gunshots seemed to stab into her heart.

Part 5

As Higashikawa watched on from the side, he seriously thought the shock would crush his heart.

The noise was so loud he thought something was wrong with his eardrums.

Finally, silence came.

The organizer woman on the upper floor said, "And with that, the 2nd attraction comes to an end. I hope the survivors will enjoy the upcoming attractions."

The figure on the upper floor tossed something small through the large gap in the broken glass. It glittered with a silver light and sounded like a coin when it landed, so it was likely a key. It would be the key to the door in the metal bars.

When they looked back up, the woman was gone. She had left.

And then the solid and unmoving door opened on its own.

Hiyama and Kazakami cautiously peered in.

"Wh-what happened? We heard one hell of a noise."

"Ha…ha ha."

They heard a relaxed and powerless laugh.

It came from Matsumi where she stood against one wall. She was holding a handgun that still had a bit of smoke rising from it. The tension holding her in place

was gone, so she slid down the wall into a sitting position.

Matsumi had survived.

The 2nd attraction was over and the operating room door had opened.

They had the key to the metal bars blocking the passageway, so they could continue on.

And…

As for Rachel at the opposite wall…

"Ha…ha?"

Her entire face was soaked with sweat and her expression was one of confusion. It was as if she did not understand how she had survived.

Higashikawa took a deep breath and said, "All of us managed to survive again. Let's keep this up."

He then walked over to the high school girl named Matsumi.

It was only once he approached that he noticed something.

Her face still held a grim and somehow irritated look.

“Take these,” she said while pressing her two handguns into Higashikawa’s grasp.

“Hey.”

“One of them still has a real bullet inside. Fire it somewhere harmless …Oh, I know. Fire it at the observation seats up above.”

She then used her chin to point toward Rachel who had sunk to the floor.

“Do the same with hers. Hurry.”

“?”

Part 6

Two gunshots rang out.

Higashikawa had fired the two handguns with a real bullet inside straight up.

The situation seemed over.

Matsumi grabbed a gun away from Higashikawa and pulled the trigger while aiming at an empty wall. However, it seemed all but the first shot had been loaded with blanks. The cylinder turned again and again, but no bullets were fired. It would clearly be of no use as a weapon, so she tossed it to the operating room floor.

Once more, all five of them had survived.

They had no idea when or where the 3rd attraction would begin, but it seemed they were doing quite well.

However, the situation was not that favorable.

After that game of aiming a gun at each other and pulling the trigger, Matsumi alone knew the truth.

In the final instant, Rachel had fired the handgun in her left hand.

Rachel had been told the right one had the blank and the left one had the real bullet.

And yet she had fired the left gun.

Saying she panicked and got mixed up was not an acceptable excuse. Rachel had clearly chosen the left gun she knew would fire a real bullet.

And Matsumi had predicted it would happen.

She had handed Rachel a safe pair of guns, but Rachel had then asked that they swap guns. Matsumi had no idea what foundation Rachel was working off of, but she had clearly grown suspicious. And so Matsumi had secretly swapped out the guns in her right and left hands before handing them to Rachel.

That had saved her life.

If she had faithfully handed over the guns like normal, Matsumi would have been killed.

"Hoo…"

Giving the guns to Higashikawa afterwards had also had meaning.

A handgun with a real bullet loaded was a powerful weapon, but it was too dangerous for Rachel to hold.

However, Matsumi doubted Rachel would have agreed if she had demanded Rachel hand over her gun. Anyone would want a weapon in this situation.

If Matsumi had tried to force Rachel, there had been a risk she would have been shot.

And so she had left her own guns with Higashikawa first. She had created an illusion of fairness on the surface . And if Rachel did snap and grow violent, the danger would fall on Higashikawa rather than Matsumi.

Fortunately, Rachel had agreed to hand her gun over to Higashikawa.

(But…)

Matsumi still did not know what had led Rachel to try to shoot her.

The attraction's rules gave no reason to want to eliminate the other participant.

However…

Beware the traitor.

The words written on that sign tore into Matsumi's chest.

She doubted those words had been referring to Rachel. The opposite was more likely. Rachel may have somehow realized a certain fact.

She may have realized that Matsumi Shirauo was on Attraction Land's side.

(Either way…)

She quietly thought while overcome with the relief of overcoming that great hurdle and the tension of the danger she had yet to escape.

(It seems simply accepting that everyone is working together for our mutual survival will not be enough to survive.)

On the surface, everything appeared to be going well.

But unseen cracks had definitely begun to spread.

From the Items Left Behind by a Dead Freelance Writer

(Everything before this point is unreadable due to corruption of the file)

are an organization filled with abnormalities. Despite their flashy activities, the structure of the organization, their personnel, and the source of their funds are all wrapped in a veil of darkness.

One of the major reasons for that is due to the members of this organization.

No one knows how the organization procures new members and what they gain from it all is unclear. There is no known common factor between the members. Nationality, race, religion, culture, or money. If a common thread in any of those categories could be found , it would provide a starting point towards locating the organization's headquarters or the foundation that supports the organization.

A few different theories have appeared, but I personally doubt whether they even have any strict

standards. I suspect it is the lack of any such thing that allows the organization to change so dramatically and disappear like an illusion when you think you have grabbed onto its tail.

Of course, if they recruit people haphazardly, they have a huge risk of accidentally taking in someone who talks a little too much or an undercover officer.

From the little information I have been able to pull together from the final words of people who have been left half-crippled or near death due to losing large portions of their body, it seems the organization has many different methods of luring people in. They truly have a great variety of systems for running their operations. Some do not realize they are working for them while some are tricked into thinking they are working for them. The usual pyramid structure needed to manage an organization does not apply.

But I have found a clue to grasping the whole picture of the organization.

I have gained the right to sneak into one of their attractions as a participant.

From the remnants of the attractions I have occasionally discovered, my odds of survival are slim. But my professional pride will not allow me to turn away from this organization.

I have set up an archive of all of the files I have gathered.

If I do die, the link with my pacemaker will automatically

(Everything beyond this point is unreadable due to corruption of the file)

Reaper Game 03: Reversal

Part 1

They approached the door in the metal bars blocking the passageway, inserted the newly-acquired key in the keyhole, and turned it.

"It's open!" shouted Kazakami in his work uniform.

They all passed through the metal bars and continued on.

The operating room had more or less confirmed their suspicions, but they were definitely in a hospital. They found hospital rooms, bathrooms, a nurse station, and a medical office. There were a few dozen hospital rooms and they could feel their tension slipping away as they searched through them one by one. Even in this situation , it was a tedious task.

The different variations in the rooms provided a great many types of objects. However, all of them were completely normal sights in hospitals. The square rooms with all but the bare minimum removed had been much more unnatural.

"This fire extinguisher could be used as a weapon."

"Hey, I think these floor lamps in the hospital rooms could be used in place of wooden swords."

Kazakami and Matsumi were selecting object after object and checking the weight and feel with somehow cheerful voices. They were looking for weapons. To Hiyama, it seemed less like they wanted something to protect themselves with and more like the more normal and cluttered areas had raised their spirits after so many empty areas.

And she sighed so the others would not notice.

Then she cautiously whispered in Higashikawa's ear.

"(What do you think?)"

"(I agree that this is a risk. We do need powerful weapons to oppose our enemies, but we will all become each other's enemies if something causes the group to split up. If that happens, we might be able to recover if we are unarmed, but weapons could cause the situation to spiral out of control. On the other hand,)" added

Higashikawa, "(we can't deny them a weapon if they say they want one. Doing so could cause the group to fall apart.)"

Hiyama completely agreed.

Apparently, the organizers had given them four handguns during the attraction in the operating room. If they were prepared to give them those weapons, what could anyone hope to do with a fire extinguisher or floor lamp? And while those weapons were not enough to overpower the organizers, they were more than enough to smash an ally's head. Kazakami and Matsumi may have wanted a weapon more for a sense of security than any practical use, but in Hiyama's eyes, they were gleefully choosing a suicidal option.

She could have agreed if they had tried to create some sort of protective equipment like a bulletproof vest, but not this.

It frustrated her that she could not put a stop to it even though she knew they were putting themselves at a disadvantage.

As Higashikawa had said, they could not force their opinions on others if they wished to maintain the group

of five. And yet the actions of any one of them could greatly affect the fates of all five.

"Do not be led astray. This has probably all been calculated out. The organizers want to split us up. This is like the North Wind and the Sun. If we do not remove our coat even after growing sweaty, we will win."

"…That's right."

Hiyama did not completely agree, but she nodded anyway. There was no need to create more cracks here.

She honestly felt their odds of survival would rise dramatically if all five of them did not have equal rights to speak.

In other words…

She wanted some strong leader to take command of the group.

"…"

She heard someone gulp.

It was the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Rachel. Despite how gorgeous she looked, she seemed to have grown even more hesitant to speak after the attraction in the operating room. Hiyama had been outside the operating room, so she did not know what the woman had experienced.

"The fire extinguisher is probably stronger in a single strike, but reach is more important for our safety. It would probably be best to take this apart."

It seemed Kazakami and Matsumi had decided to use the floor lamp. They removed the lamp cover, pulled off the cord, and grabbed just the 1 meter 50 cm wooden stick.

Hiyama grew even more dejected.

She had no confidence in her ability to get along with those two.

"Hey."

Hiyama half-sarcastically felt Higashikawa was an amazing person to be able to speak to the two of them.

She also felt his presence as an individual was growing more diluted the more he emphasized the group of five.

"Could you try the same thing as before with those sticks?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"The elevators."

Higashikawa's reason for leading Kazakami and Matsumi there was likely to prevent them from growing violent if provoked.

They had been under a lot of stress. They had been forced to take part in such unreasonable attractions. If the stopper was removed, it would begin to overflow.

And now they had acquired makeshift weapons. If they lost their means of controlling their unstable hearts, many different factors could lead them to growing violent simply to relieve stress.

If that meant they attacked the wall or a door, it was no real problem. However, that same violence could be turned on a human. And the victim would be Hiyama or one of the others who were still rational.

The five of them headed for the elevators.

The elevator hall next to the nurse station was small, but it still contained four normal elevators and one freight elevator.

However, to match the Hell Hospital theme, each of the elevators was completely blocked off by a semicircle of metal bars. The shape reminded Hiyama of a bird cage .

These metal bars had doors in them too, but they used a card reader. The key from the operating room could not open them.

However…

"There we go…"

Kazakami stuck the wooden stick through the gaps of the metal bars to reach inside. He was trying to press the elevator button.

The button clicked a few times as he pressed it, but it did not light up.

"…Doesn't seem to be doing anything."

"But if we could get through these bars, do you think we could force open the elevator door? This isn't an action movie, but we might be able to reach the first floor if we climb down the shaft."

"But we can't find the card key to get through," said Kazakami while stomping on the floor in frustration.

Hiyama felt this was a sign he was growing more confident with the weapon.

"We couldn't use the stairs either," cut in Matsumi while holding her own wooden stick. "Let's head that way. There were two sets of emergency stairs and they were both covered by metal bars. We couldn't go up or down."

"It looks like the key from the operating room only gave us free use of this floor. First it was the five bombs and the wall. Then it was the four guns and the key. Now it's this entire floor and multiple card readers."

"I hope there isn't a limit to how many times we can use the card and we're stuck here forever if we don't use it on the door to the exit."

"They crawl through the ducts in action movies, right?"

Hiyama hated how they had to go through with each and every childish suggestion. There was no way a chance like that had been left for them and yet they had to pull one of the hospital beds out into the hallway, climb up on it, and remove the duct cover.

It was all a waste of time.

As Hiyama thought on that, Higashikawa stood on top of the bed with Matsumi sitting on his shoulders peering into the duct.

"Hmm, it's too dark to tell much, but it's too small to fit inside."

"Th-then," said Rachel in a frail voice as if to force back her unease. "Do we need to find the card key to continue on?"

Hiyama could not believe she thought that

The enemy had prepared handguns and bombs for the attraction. With such destructive traps, it was possible they could remove some of the explosive and use it for

themselves. But using it on the obvious metal bars would be completely foolish. Hiyama could not believe none of the others had realized they needed to destroy the walls or the floor.

But Kazakami reached his limit on his own. The weapon had given him more confident, but it had also given him a shorter temper.

“Gaaaaaaahhhhhhh!! I can’t stand this, I can’t stand this, I can’t stand this!! I’ve had enough! I can’t keep doing what they want again and again!!”

“H-hey…”

“I said I’ve had enough!! The rest of you can do it yourself. That’s how it was with that last attraction, right!? You can continue on without me. One of you has to complete the attraction is all!!”

After that outburst, Kazakami ran off down the dark hallway with his wooden stick still in hand. Higashikawa began to run after him, but Hiyama grabbed his shoulder.

She whispered so Matsumi, the other one with a weapon, could not hear.

"(Leave him be. You don't want to break a bone or anything over an angry outburst, do you?)"

After a short pause, they heard noises of destruction in the distance. Rachel covered her ears with her hands and crouched down. Kazakami was likely attacking everything nearby in order to pacify his heart that was near bursting.

He may have thought he was a strong person, but his driving force was clearly that of a weak person.

Higashikawa asked a question with the expression of someone looking at an extraordinarily large pile of laundry.

"Wh-what should we do?"

"As I said, leave him be. He'll run out of breath before long. Once he stops moving, he will come back to his senses and realize his actions are meaningless."

But that was only for the brief period before the blood rose to his head once more.

Part 2

Despite Hiyama's expectations, the sounds of destruction continued for quite a while from beyond the darkness. Kazakami must have had quite a bit of strength remaining. Hiyama was coldly impressed that he could continue destroying without growing tired of it.

She had always had a desire to watch any violent actions from a short distance away. She had been surprised when she had learned the people around her were not the same. It seemed normal people's fields of vision narrowed when they sensed danger and they lost the ability to think straight.

She had always felt that actually lowered their chances of survival.

And she felt as if that state had continued ever since she was forced to take part in these attractions. She felt unpleasantly focused. It reminded her of being tired but unable to sleep.

She was not normally such a cold person.

Or at least she wanted to believe she was not.

The four left behind by Kazakami sat on the floor, leaned against the wall, or otherwise took a comfortable

pose to help restore their strength. No one had suggested it, but they had all naturally started to do it.

"Hey," asked Higashikawa.

"What is it?"

"I have no idea what the organizers are after, but they have to be monitoring us at all times, right? How do you think they're doing that?"

"They probably have cameras, transmitters, or other sensors."

"But where are they? I haven't seen any security cameras…"

"Well," cut in Matsumi sluggishly. "Do you know what the lenses on cell phones and smartphones are like? They're practically the size of a pinhole. They could hide them almost anywhere. Even if we found one or two of them, we could never destroy all of them. And they could even have hidden tiny GPS devices on our bodies."

"…"

While still crouched on the ground, Rachel glanced over at Matsumi, but then averted her gaze without saying anything.

Higashikawa seemed to have noticed it, but he made sure to keep the flow of the conversation going.

"If we used something like paint to cover the walls and floor, do you think we could cover up all of the tiny camera lenses they've set up?"

"That's a good idea. I'm in the perfect mood for spray painting some graffiti anyway."

At that point, the sounds of destruction finally ceased.

Hiyama and the others exchanged a glance.

"…Is he done?"

"I hope so, but could the organizers have done something?" said Hiyama in a tone of voice that made even her shudder.

Rachel jumped in fright when she heard those words. With that reaction, she may have thought Hiyama actually wanted that to have been what happened.

But…

Hiyama could not deny she would not mind too much.

Finally, they heard the footsteps of someone walking down the dark hallway.

Was it Kazakami?

Or was it the organizer woman?

They all focused on the darkness and saw…

"…Hey."

It was Kazakami.

He was quite sweaty and seemed to have learned his lesson.

"I guess…well…sorry about that. I said a lot of things …but I didn't mean it. Let's work together to escape here. I won't argue against that."

He was lying.

Hiyama was convinced of it.

But as she expected, Higashikawa accepted him back with a slightly stiff smile. Hiyama felt a headache coming on as she let out a slight sigh and spoke as nonthreateningly as she could manage.

"Do you have a moment?"

"What?"

"I remember seeing some wire back over there. It was in a locker for cleaning supplies in the medical office. I doubt we can use it to pick any locks, but it might come in handy. I will go get it."

"In that case…"

Before Higashikawa could say something cooperative, Hiyama held her index finger to her lips.

"I'll be fine on my own. The organizers did not appear despite that rampage of his. Nor did he set off any kind of trap."

Kazakami must have only just now realized that possibility because his face quickly paled, but Hiyama did not care.

She gave a slight wave and headed down the passageway.

She did not actually care about the wire.

She wanted some time to think alone.

She had to think about whether she could truly overcome the upcoming attractions along with that group.

Part 3

Hiyama was a relatively perfect person.

Some of it came naturally to her and some of it was an intentional facade. It was rare for someone to only have one or the other. In Hiyama's case, she had set clear values for her goal and worked to achieve them.

This could be seen in her academic history, her occupation, and her qualifications.

And not all of it was that sort of thing that could be filled out on a form. Some categories were more approximate such as her personal relations, her breast size, the feel of her skin, and her weight management. She sought perfection in everything she could think of that was within reach. She always sought perfection. Some might view it as a sort of sickness.

The main force driving her toward perfection were the words of a certain “curse”.

“…This is quite something,” she muttered in shock within the dark hallway.

The wallpaper had been partially torn up and even the window protected by the metal bars had been broken. Most of the unlit fluorescent lights had been broken. With the level of destruction, one would have thought a riot had occurred. Hiyama raised her level of caution once more when she saw how much that man had done on his own.

But she was not afraid of his strength.

She was afraid of how he had not grown tired of the violence until he had destroyed everything so thoroughly .

"That damn deviant," she spat out.

However, her words were surprisingly calm and lacking any real emotion. Some may have felt those words more sharply than words filled with obvious hatred or scorn.

And then…

The curse came.

She could not tell if it was overflowing from the darkness or from within herself, but the curse that would suddenly make her suffer had arrived.

" . That's her, right?"

"It be helped."

"That course horrible that you think?"

"…!!"

She heard a strange noise. Despite how "calm" she was supposed to be, it took her several seconds to realize it was the sound of her hand grabbing at her face.

And yet the curse would not end.

Once it began flowing out, it would not stop until it had taken over Hiyama's heart.

"After all, the higher ups of the university and even said ."

"The latest that course that girl mistaken."

"Or even become . I even heard a worldwide ."

Hiyama would not go on a rampage.

She was not the type to force her problems onto others like Kazakami was.

She continued taking shallow breaths for over 20 seconds as she stabilized her mind. She could feel her heartbeat gradually returning to normal.

(To hell with you. To hell with all of you.)

Treating a criminal's family the same as the criminal was a horrible prejudice, but this curse was even more unreasonable than that. She did not want to remember what idiot it was that had proposed the idea, but it seemed wrong to assume such a great connection just because the "course" of someone's life (their birthplace, living environment, etc.) was similar to that of a historical criminal. Saying that was no different than saying everyone who ate meat was a mass murderer or everyone who put three sugar cubes in their coffee was a rapist.

She wanted to deny it.

She wanted to deny that curse.

However, she had no intention of arguing against everyone who attacked her. A pointless argument was exactly what they wanted. And anyone listening would not think very hard about who was right. She had no interest in unproductive arguments. Her "counterattack" had to be something more effective.

"…Honestly."

After finally completely sealing the erupting curse, Hiyama calmly came to a conclusion.

To be blunt, she hated people like Kazakami.

However, the organizers had likely chosen the participants knowing full well Hiyama would feel that way. After all, the organizers wanted to see people painfully struggling. She did not know how they had done it, but it would not surprise her if they had analyzed everyone's personalities and created a group that would not get along.

In fact, they had no reason to select people who could work together.

"…"

She could not let herself be manipulated.

She had to remain calm.

She could not let any malice be stirred up within her.

She had to remain the same as always.

The attractions the organizers forced on them were unreasonable to the extreme. They would only laugh at their pathetic results if they gave in and acted rashly. She would not let herself do as they expected. She would escape the expectations of the organizers who supposedly controlled the entire situation. She would overcome every problem she was faced with. She would find an opening and take advantage of it. She would return home safely.

And she needed help to escape.

She needed that help even if the only option was some hopeless people who would be nothing but a burden.

"I'll be fine," muttered Hiyama.

She had come to a conclusion for the moment. She needed to return to the elevator hall where Higashikawa and the others were, but she had claimed to be getting a bundle of wire from the medical office locker. That meant they would find it odd if she returned without it.

It was annoying, but Hiyama turned toward the medical office.

But then…

"…?"

She heard a crunching noise. When Kazakami had broken the window behind the bars with his wooden stick, the glass shards had scattered across the dark floor. She had stepped on a shard with her pumps. The shard was small enough to not puncture the bottom of the shoe.

But Hiyama was not focused on the floor.

Instead…

"Why is this…?"

Part 4

Hiyama did not return.

Higashikawa and the others had no clock, so they initially assumed their sense of time was off. They assumed not even a few minutes had passed and the constant tension was making it seem longer.

But they eventually began to think something was wrong.

"Hey," said Kazakami. "Her name was Hiyama, right? Well, how far was she going?"

"She can't have gone too far. Our path is blocked off by the bars."

Then why was she taking so long?

None of them had an answer to that question.

"…What should we do? Should we go looking for her? " suggested Higashikawa.

But Matsumi frowned from where she sat on the floor and replied, "We don't have to. She might just want to be alone. Or maybe she had to use the bathroom."

"Um…" said Rachel while crouching and avoiding looking in Matsumi's direction. "What if Hiyama-san found some kind way out? If she did…"

She was not coming back.

It sounded nice if you said she was scouting out ahead on her own.

However, it could also be said she was leaving the other four behind while heading for the exit.

Kazakami grew concerned.

“W-wait a second!! Then we need to hurry. Hiyama is taking it all for herself!!”

“Taking all of what…?”

“Do you really think the organizers will leave the exit open? They might let the first person through and seal the door afterwards!! What if the card key can only be used once!?”

Nothing like that had happened with the previous attractions and they could all pass through the door even if the card key could only be used once, but Kazakami was overwhelmed by the danger he had thought up.

Kazakami had started to subconsciously swing around his weapon a bit, so Higashikawa agreed to search for Hiyama rather than try to oppose the man. He doubted there was some convenient way out, though.

"I'm not going," bluntly said Matsumi who had her own weapon.

Everyone turned toward Rachel.

Her shoulders jumped slightly, but she hesitantly stood up.

From her past statements and actions, she did not seem the type to charge into danger, but Higashikawa figured she was afraid to be alone with Matsumi and her weapon.

No one had died in the operating room attraction, but it still must have been quite a shock for her.

"Then let's go. Matsumi-chan was it? If anything happens, just shout."

"Sure thing. And don't call me '-chan'."

Matsumi did not care about Kazakami's concerns, so she watched the other three head down the passageway.

As they did, the man in the work uniform began muttering something.

"Dammit. Hiyama is going to pay if she went on ahead and left us behind…"

Hiyama would want as many survivors as possible just like everyone else, but that idea seemed completely missing from Kazakami's logic.

Higashikawa felt something odd on his back.

Rachel was nervously grabbing onto his clothes. However, Higashikawa doubted this had anything to do with her viewing him in a favorable light. Hiyama had disappeared and both Matsumi and Kazakami held ominous weapons. The only safe person nearby just so happened to be Higashikawa.

They spotted a figure about 15 meters down the hallway.

It was too dark to see anything in detail, but glass was scattered on the floor where Kazakami had gone on his rampage. A female silhouette was visible in the middle of it. This was definitely Hiyama.

However…

The figure was not standing.

She was collapsed on the glass-covered floor.

All three of them were confused.

That confusion was of course partially due to Hiyama's unmoving form collapsed on the floor with glass shards everywhere.

But that was not all.

The other figure swinging a fire extinguisher up into the air right next to Hiyama was even more unexpected.

Rachel let out a scream at the top of her lungs.

The figure holding the fire extinguisher turned toward them.

They could now see who it was.

"The organizer…!!" shouted Kazakami.

The woman looked between Higashikawa's group and Hiyama before tossing the fire extinguisher aside and running away as quickly as she could.

"Wait!!"

It was of course Kazakami who first shouted out and began pursuing her. His weapon was nothing more than a floor lamp, but it was enough to change how he felt. He was able to run off into the darkness the organizer woman was trying to disappear into.

Higashikawa began to head toward Hiyama, but Rachel gave a strong tug on his clothes.

He turned around and she shook her head.

He understood where she was coming from.

After sensing even the slightest hint of violence, she did not want to approach. She could not handle any more. Higashikawa felt the same.

However…

"She might not be dead yet. We might be able to save her."

Rachel slowly let go of Higashikawa's clothing, returning his freedom.

He ran over to Hiyama, but Rachel did not follow.

The hallway was dark enough that he could not see her injuries with any detail. But from her silhouette, she at least had no broken limbs, her skull had not caved in, and she had no other obvious signs of damage.

"Are you okay? Hey, can you hear me!?"

The organizer woman had been using a fire extinguisher. It was a blunt weapon. She had likely been aiming for the head. Higashikawa was unsure if he should shake her, so he settled for shouting at her. He wanted to treat her, but he did not know what he was supposed to do for a blow to the head.

He doubted cooling her with ice or a compress mattered much in a life-or-death situation.

"Ukh…"

After Higashikawa had shouted for a short while, Hiyama finally let out a groan.

But she did not get up.

She may have had a concussion.

But then Higashikawa heard a cry come from the direction the organizer woman and Kazakami had disappeared in.

It was a male voice.

“Shit!! What is going on!?” shouted Kazakami in an irritated voice.

The organizer who controlled the stage may have fought back. Or he may have fallen into a trap.

Higashikawa wanted all of them to return home alive.

He did not want to leave Hiyama, but he could not ignore Kazakami if his life was in danger.

“Rachel. Rachel!”

When he forcefully called her name, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman jumped in shock while watching on from a short distance.

“Look after her for me. I’m going to go check on Kazakami!!”

"Eh? But…"

If he waited around for every single opinion, he would never get anything done, so Higashikawa ran off into the darkness without waiting for Rachel's reply.

(But why did this happen?)

Higashikawa thought while rushing along.

(Why did the organizer appear on the same stage as us ? Isn't she afraid of us fighting back? They didn't seem like the type to leave such an opening.)

They still had not seen the rules of the overall attraction. Perhaps there was some rule behind the organizer woman appearing at this time.

If so, discovering why the organizer had taken action could lead to discovering the overall rules and perhaps even a method of reversing the situation.

"Wait. This is…"

Higashikawa saw a sign and stopped running after Kazakami.

He was at the medical office.

This was where Hiyama had intended to get a bundle of wire.

"…"

He took a slight detour before running after Kazakami once more.

He found the man next to the emergency stairs.

Kazakami shouted at Higashikawa as if to send out his frustration over having the metal bars block his path. He did not kick at the bars, but that might have been because Hiyama had mentioned the possibility of traps earlier.

"Shit, shit!! We really do need the card key to these bars!!"

The emergency staircase headed both up and down. The organizer woman was catching her breath in that space. Just as Kazakami had said, she held a thin card in one hand.

They could not reach her like this.

Now that he was sure of that, Higashikawa placed a hand on Kazakami's shoulder.

"Move."

"What are you going to do!? She has the card key. We can't do anything!!"

"That's not what I'm doing."

Higashikawa pushed Kazakami completely out of the way and approached the metal bars without worrying about any traps. More specifically, he approached the small door meant to let people through.

But he was not trying to open the door.

His intention was the exact opposite.

"What?" said Kazakami in confusion.

The organizer woman who had been trying to escape to another floor spun around when she realized what was going on.

Higashikawa used the wire he had taken from the medical office to tie together the metal bars and the bars

of the small door. He wrapped the wire around again and again and again.

It was as if he was locking himself inside the birdcage.

In a way, that was exactly what he was doing. But in another way, it was the exact opposite of what he was doing.

"She left her safe zone and entered our cage. She ran away because she knows it's dangerous standing on the same stage as us. So why did she take that risk in the first place?"

Higashikawa bent the wire back and forth enough times that it broke off due to metal fatigue.

After making sure the metal bars were sealed shut, he gave the rest of the wire to Kazakami.

"Seal off the bars in front of the other emergency staircase and the elevators just in case! That way, the organizers can't reach us!! The invisible rules to the overall attraction are probably hidden somewhere near Hiyama. If we can figure those rules out, we won't have to continue feeling our way blindly through a minefield! We'll be able to move freely!!"

"!!"

The organizer woman frantically ran up the emergency staircase and Kazakami ran toward the other emergency staircase.

If they knew the rules, they could fight back.

In all likelihood, they were done for if they could not make a reversal here.

Part 5

Higashikawa ran back to where they had found Hiyama collapsed on the floor.

She had still not gotten up. Rachel had stayed by her side without running away.

"…There has to be something here." Higashikawa walked right next to Hiyama and looked all around. " Something. Something that will help us reverse this situation!! She didn't carry her here after attacking. She was attacked here, so it has to be something visible here. There has to be some logical reason the organizer attacked Hiyama here. Some rule!!"

But he did not find any revolutionary information.

Due to Kazakami's rampage, the hallway's wallpaper was torn up, the glass supposedly protected by the metal bars was broken, and the unlit fluorescent lights were broken. Several sharp fragments were scattered on the ground, so it was a dangerous place to be lying in.

But that was all.

Higashikawa could see nothing that hinted at a special rule. He started to panic. Sweat poured from his forehead . Some overwhelming rule was supposed to have shown itself. If he could not find something like that here, they would continue to be toyed with while not knowing the rules. He had no proof of it, but that was the future that appeared in his mind.

The sweat pouring from his body only irritated him further.

He used his sleeve to wipe the sweat from his brow, but then he frowned.

Something had caught his attention.

"Where's the wind?"

He focused on a single point.

He focused on the window that had been protected by the metal bars.

"The glass was broken, so at least some wind should be coming in. So why is it so stuffy in here?"

It may have simply been windless night.

Despite the season, it may have simply been a hot, calm night.

But…

He grabbed at the bars over the window and focused outside once more. Higashikawa should have been seeing the scenery from the deep darkness of the hallway about ten stories up.

And yet…

"What the hell?" said Higashikawa in confusion.

There was no change. Despite the night scenery spreading out in front of him, the air outside the window

and inside the window was exactly the same. The temperature, the humidity, the freshness, the lack of wind, and everything else were exactly the same. It was as if there was no distinction between outside and inside. It was as if it was all one giant mass.

And more than that…

"…"

Higashikawa looked down.

The scene he saw there would have sent a chill down the spine of anyone who was afraid of heights.

He saw something sparkling there.

"Glass shards?"

They were likely from when Kazakami had broken the window with his wooden stick. For some reason, they were unnaturally floating partway up the 10 story height. No, it was more than that. They threw off the sense of distance in the scenery. Those countless glass shards looked completely out of place in the otherwise perfect scenery.

Could it be?

Could it be…?

"There isn't any night scenery or ocean outside," muttered Higashikawa blankly. "We aren't actually 10 stories up."

He had lost a major assumption.

Higashikawa converted the truth before his eyes into words.

"We were only made to think we are!!"

Most likely, all of the windows were covered with a semispherical wall. By adding some trick art onto the inside, they had all been led to think they were 10 stories up and that they could see the night scenery out the window.

If it was daytime or the hallway was fully lit by the fluorescent lights, they may have noticed it right away. But the slight oddities of that scenery were hard to notice with so little light.

That was also why the emergency staircases and elevators were blocked off with metal bars. That helped hide that they were not actually 10 stories up.

That was the rule. That was why Hiyama had been attacked. And in that case…

"I've got it."

Higashikawa entered a random hospital room and disassembled a floor lamp into a wooden stick like Matsumi and Kazakami had. When Rachel saw Higashikawa enter the hallway with the weapon, she let out a small shriek.

But he was not planning to use it on a human being.

Higashikawa stuck the wooden stick through a gap in the bars and pushed it in.

As expected, it struck something hard that should not have been in that night scenery.

But it did not stop there.

The wooden stick dug in as if it had pierced through a cardboard box. When he pulled it out, a thumb-sized hole had opened in the trick art of the night scenery. Bright light poured in through the hole.

There was something beyond it.

There was a space there.

The organizers were hiding some secret there.

“Dammit, dammit!! If only we could do something about these bars!!”

Higashikawa let go of the wooden stick and grabbed the bars with both hands without worrying about possible traps. He poured his full weight into shaking them back and forth. He knew there was no way that would move metal bars that were welded into place, but he had to try.

And then something truly bizarre happened.

With a snapping sound, all of the metal bars broke away from the window frame.

"Wha-…?"

Higashikawa fell on his ass, but then he realized he did not even have time to ask questions.

He was falling out the window.

His shoulders forcefully struck the semispherical outer wall that was covered in trick art.

With the sound of ripping cardboard, Higashikawa rolled beyond that wall.

After being in the dark for so long, the bright lights burned his eyes.

"Kh… Where am I…?"

He looked around to find a tidy-looking bar. One wall was covered with a giant monitor, but it seemed to be used for decorative lighting. The area also contained a counter and a few round tables. A laptop computer was prepared in front of each and every chair. They all displayed a map of the Hell Hospital that Higashikawa and the others had been in with a few strange dots on it.

As expected, it showed no information on any floors besides the one they had been on. It had not been an actual hospital.

And…

His eyes met with someone else's.

She was a college-aged girl with large headphones over her ears.

This was not the organizer woman they had been confronting before.

However…

(If she's here, she must be one of the organizers!!)

Higashikawa picked up his wooden stick from the floor and held it tightly in his hands. He smelled a slight scent of vanilla. She had clearly been relaxing at leisure while watching their suffering.

And then a loud voice came from behind him.

"Hey, listen to this. While I was wrapping the wire on, the entire set of bars came off! …Wait, what the hell is this!?"

It was Kazakami and Matsumi.

Perhaps due to their weapons, they did not hesitate to head through the "hole" that Higashikawa had found. And then they spotted the organizer just as he had.

Belligerence ran through their eyes.

Higashikawa felt he had just seen the moment when pent up anger ripped away the façade of justice.

Fear ran through the eyes of the headphone-wearing organizer woman.

She frantically looked over to the room's exit.

But she did not make it in time.

Matsumi threw her wooden stick at her back. An odd cry of pain leaked from the headphone-wearing woman's mouth. She somehow managed not to trip, but Kazakami had already run up to her.

He grabbed the headphone-wearing woman's hair and forcefully pulled her to the floor.

Kazakami swung his wooden stick down on her upper body. He did not hold back and clearly swung it as hard as he could. Matsumi did not stop him. She picked back up the wooden stick she had thrown and headed toward the headphone-wearing woman as well.

It was enough violence to make Higashikawa want to turn his back.

But he also felt it was unavoidable.

This was one of the organizers who enjoyed toying with human lives and forcing these attractions on people. Anyone would want to get back at someone like that.

"*Kozue!!*"

Another door opened.

This time it was the organizer woman who had escaped through the metal bars of the emergency staircase.

This woman who had showy hair and looked like a cabaret club girl was the one Higashikawa and the others had faced up until now. However, she looked so confused that Higashikawa almost questioned whether she really was the same person.

"Wait! We can explain!! Please save Kozue!!"

"…"

The cabaret club girl frantically tried to approach, but Higashikawa held up his wooden stick to hold her back.

She gritted her teeth, but stayed where she was. Meanwhile, Higashikawa could hear a sound similar to a thick blanket being beaten.

At first glance, their reversal had been a success.

But Higashikawa felt that something was seriously off about the situation.

He felt something leading up to this did not add up.

(I know.)

Suddenly, it came to him.

(They easily gave us four handguns during the operating room attraction. The organizers must have plenty of weapons. So why? Why aren't they using those overwhelming weapons to hold us back? Even a single handgun would turn this entire situation around.)

It had been the same when Hiyama was attacked.

Why had the woman used a fire extinguisher? The organizers could freely use bombs and guns, so they should have been able to kill Hiyama much more easily and certainly.

(Something isn't right. This is odd. It was also strange how fragile the bars over the window were. And if they had simply made the semicircular wall outside the window out of concrete, we couldn't have done anything even if we caught on to the trick. And Kazakami said the same thing happened with the other bars. It's almost as if …)

Suddenly, Higashikawa noticed a corkboard on one wall.

An A4 piece of paper pinned to it said the following:

Player 1:

Higashikawa Mamoru.

Hiyama Tomoko.

Kazakami Shinzou.

Matsumi Shirauo.

Rachel Skydance.

That required no explanation. It was a list of the participants in the attraction. Photos of their faces could be seen near the printout.

But that was not the issue.

Next to it was a list of other names.

At first, he thought it was a list of the organizer's names.

However…

Player 2:

Anzai Kyousuke.

Harumi Quartervalley.

Hasegawa Hotaru.

Kusaka Kozue.

Yakushiji Aisu.

"Player…2?" muttered Higashikawa before feeling an unpleasant sweat.

He finally realized something.

He caught on to a certain malice.

He learned of the cruelty of the true organizers who controlled the entire attraction.

"No. Wait, Kazakami! Matsumi!! Don't kill her!!"

"What!? What are you saying? We're done for if we don't turn this around! And you have no right to tell me what to do!!"

It was partially Higashikawa's fault this had happened . He had prevented the five of them from fighting amongst themselves by turning all of their hatred toward the organizers. He had guided Kazakami's violent nature in that direction.

But the true organizers may have expected even that.

"You have to stop!!"

"Why!?"

"She is not one of the real organizers! She's from a different group of players taking part in this attraction!!"

"What?"

Kazakami and Matsumi both turned toward Higashikawa.

The girl named Kozue who had been pummeled again and again by those wooden sticks was lying on the ground and only faintly breathing.

Could she still be saved?

Higashikawa did not know, but he had to at least ensure she was not injured any further.

After all…

"The real organizers planned for us to escape like this! They let us escape so we would turn our anger on the first people we met. There was no other way for us to get past the bars on the windows or hallways. We thought the Hell Hospital was the stage, but a larger stage had been built around that. We're all trapped inside while

split up into different groups!! They want us to kill innocent people without even being told to!!”

Records of Player 2's Actions

It all started with a wanted ad posted on a bulletin board on campus.

Harumi, one of that group of four friends, showed interest in it and they forced another student named Anzai Kyousuke to come along because they felt safer with a guy going along. And so they had arrived at the world famous amusement park called Attraction Land to monitor some new attractions.

While there, they had been knocked unconscious with some kind of drug and found themselves in some sort of facility when they came to.

The organizers ordered them to take command over another group called Player 1. They were informed of the window weak point and then told to have Player 1 complete a set number of attractions without noticing that weak point. If they succeeded, all five members of Player 2 would be set free. That was what they had been told.

And if they failed, every member of both Player 1 and Player 2 would be killed.

To truly save everyone, Player 2 had to administer the attractions perfectly and Player 1 had to clear them all. That was the only way.

Kozue, Aisu, and the others had of course been left speechless when they learned what the attractions entailed.

The members of Player 1 would obviously all die if they went through those attractions again and again.

But the five members of Player 2 had been ultimately unable to resist. If they did, they would be killed. And they knew the organizers could make good on their threat. Learning that all of the videos they had been shown were real had made them painfully aware of that.

All Player 2 was able to do was follow the organizers' orders and force Player 1 to take part in the attractions while praying they survived.

However, they had not simply assumed they would be safely released if they did nothing more than follow their orders. The five members of Player 2 had split into two groups. One group had administered the attractions while the other searched the building in hopes of finding an exit.

Anzai, Harumi, and Hotaru had been in the search group.

Kozue and Aisu had been in the attraction group.

The overall attraction using Player 1 and Player 2 had ended with Player 1’s victory because they had found the exit.

What had led to Player 2’s defeat?

Was it because all five of them had not worked to crush Player 1?

Or was it because they had made excuses to themselves while administering those attractions that cornered Player 1?

Reaper Game 04: Natural Enemy

Part 1

"Kozue!!"

The people who ran in shouting that name were likely the other members of Player 2. They were three college-aged men and women. They circled around where Kozue was collapsed on the floor and then glared at Higashikawa and the others with intense hostility.

But one woman of Player 2 had beaten down Hiyama.

Hiyama entered the bar outside the Hell Hospital while propped up by Rachel's shoulder. When Player 2 saw the trail of red blood flowing from Hiyama's temple, they held back the comments they were about to let fly.

"…"

"…"

The two groups glared at each other.

As far as direct damage went, Player 1 and Player 2 had both had a single woman injured. The amount of

damage was identical, so it seemed neither side could blame the other.

However…

(No. That isn't how it works.)

Higashikawa could feel a strained atmosphere filling the bar.

Anger, hatred, and resentment could not be cancelled out like that. Regardless of the level of actual damage, it would continue flowing out until the person was satisfied. Even a soldier who had mowed down countless guerrillas or terrorists would be overwhelmed with hatred if one of his comrades in arms was killed.

One could only hold back one's emotions with reason when in a situation where acting out of pure emotion would most definitely lead to a worse situation.

In most cases, the police, military, or prisons played the role that held people back. But none of those things were present here, so the brakes that controlled their overflowing emotions were not functioning properly.

If they threw insults at each other and grabbed their weapons, the situation could quickly become bloody for everyone involved.

(The ones who hold the key to a bloodless resolution are…)

Higashikawa glanced over at Hiyama.

And then at Kozue whose breathing was very shallow.

The resentment and hatred held by both Player 1 and Player 2 was based in those two injured women.

If those two direct victims could tell everyone they did not want an attack on their behalf, the other members would lose their justification for letting their emotions explode out.

Of course, logic did not always apply when it came to human emotion.

However, if someone attacked without that justification, the entire situation would be different.

Instead of a confrontation between Player 1 and Player 2, it would be a confrontation between that one person and the nine other members of Player 1 and Player 2.

A fight with makeshift weapons between two groups of five would be a disaster.

But what about nine against one?

With that overwhelming difference, they might be able to restrain the one person without injuring them too badly.

If everyone retained their right to speak, a natural structure would form that could act in place of the police and restrain anyone who grew violent.

Ideally, they could do that without creating a dictator, but…

"…"

"…"

Whether Hiyama and Kozue realized their importance or not, they averted their gaze when Higashikawa looked toward them.

It was no good.

Higashikawa then heard a slight noise. It was the sound of Kazakami taking a slight step forward. As Player 2 was made up of four women and one man, the college-aged man was naturally the one who responded by stepping slightly forward himself. If the information on the corkboard was accurate, his name was Anzai Kyousuke.

The situation was going to explode.

The atmosphere reminded Higashikawa of a balloon filled with too much air.

(Hiyama and Kusaka Kozue are not going to do anything. But the idea of changing this from 5 against 5 to 9 against 1 wasn't a bad one. Is there any way I can do it? Is there any way to lead them to that same result without using the two direct victims!?)

Higashikawa had disassembled a floor lamp to create the hole out of the Hell Hospital. In other words, he held a weapon.

He tightened his grip on it and took a deep breath.

And he spoke.

"Listen. I don't want to die here."

As expected, Kazakami and Anzai both turned hostile eyes in Higashikawa's direction.

"What's your point?"

"You're thinking the same thing, aren't you? If either Player 1 or Player 2 puts their hands up in surrender, we can achieve safety."

Higashikawa grinned when he heard Anzai say that.

This would work.

He was willing to talk. Since Anzai had not yelled or attacked without listening at all, the situation was better than it might have been.

"Yes."

Trying to be idealistic would help nothing here.

Saying something that would reach none of them would simply confuse the situation.

And so…

Higashikawa Mamoru pointed his handmade weapon straight forward.

"I was thinking the same thing. Which is why I'm doing this."

He pointed his weapon at Kazakami who was still on the verge of attacking Player 2.

He pointed his weapon at a member of Player 1 who should have been his comrade.

Everyone in the bar froze.

Kazakami was the one with the weapon pointed at him, but everyone including Matsumi, Rachel, and the five of Player 2 all gasped.

Before anyone could do anything else, Higashikawa continued to speak.

If he did not take the initiative here, bloodshed would be unavoidable.

"Who knows what will happen if we fight 5 against 5. But what if that balance is broken? I don't care whether I'm with Player 1 or Player 2. I'll join the winning side. I'll join the side that lets me survive. So put your weapon down, Kazakami. Or do you want to take on the rest of us by yourself?"

"…Damn you. I thought we were on the same side."

"The organizers decided that, not me." After saying that, Higashikawa then pointed his weapon at Anzai Kyousuke of Player 2. "And if you decide to fight, I'll be Player 2's enemy. Let me be blunt. You all have the advantage while I'm sticking with Player 2. That destroys the five against five structure. Do you really want to give that up just to begin a 50/50 fight to the death? Wouldn't it be better to keep the odds on your side?"

"…Tch."

Anzai clicked his tongue and took a step back.

After seeing that, Higashikawa questioned the five members of Player 2 once more.

"We need to exchange information if we are to escape this place alive. Not that I think we have much useful information we could give the people who have been monitoring us this whole time."

"Understood."

He had moved from Player 1 to Player 2.

They had escaped the bloodshed for the time being, but a strained atmosphere still filled the bar. Before Higashikawa could walk over, Hiyama whispered in his ear.

"(Thank you for that.)"

However…

"(But there was a chance you could have been attacked by everyone else for doing that. Do not carelessly make that sort of choice.)

A chill ran down his spine.

Player 1 could have easily hated him as a simple traitor.

Player 2 had no real reason to accept in a traitor.

He could have been rejected by both groups.

That would create a situation of nine against one.

The exact situation Higashikawa Mamoru had set up as a penalty could have been forced onto him.

Part 2

春海＝クォーターバレー
長谷川蛍
安西恭介
久坂こずえ
薬師寺愛沙

The plain-looking male college student was Anzai Kyousuke.

The blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman who used slightly-broken Japanese was Harumi.

The tall beautiful woman who had long black hair and gave a cool-headed impression was Hotaru.

The woman wearing headphones and bandages was Kozue.

The girl with a showy hairstyle who would have fit in at a cabaret club was Aisu.

The above five members of Player 2 introduced themselves. Unlike Higashikawa and the others of Player 1, they all attended the same university and had known each other before taking part in this attraction.

Player 1 had been required to construct their interpersonal relationships from the ground up under such extreme situations, so they felt a bit jealous of Player 2.

However, this was a situation where a mistake would get someone killed. When all of the possible deaths would be someone you knew, the situation could be seen as even worse than simply having to be suspicious of everyone.

"This way."

Higashikawa followed Anzai out of the bar.

Harumi and Hotaru went with them. Kozue was injured and Aisu was remaining in the bar to treat her.

The scenery changed dramatically upon leaving through the door.

"…What?"

"It's a supermarket or a giant shopping center. That's what it looks like anyway."

Unlike the Hell Hospital, this area was quite large and brightly illuminated by fluorescent lights. It looked two or three times as large as a school gym. Shelves filled with precooked food and seasonings were lined up like the bookshelves of a school library or the shoe lockers in

a school entrance. Perishable foods like vegetables and fish were displayed along the outer perimeter.

Hotaru, the tall woman, spoke while maintaining a set distance from Higashikawa.

“Do you perhaps find this place to be familiar?”

“Familiar? …No, wait.” Higashikawa frowned. And then it hit him. “This is a lot like one of the places in the attraction monitor videos. What was this one? I think it was the one with stopping someone’s heart and reviving them with an AED.”

That attraction had taken place in a large supermarket.

In that case…

“There are more,” added the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Harumi as she pointed in one direction.

There was an employee door near the perishable foods .

Higashikawa opened the door and found something completely different.

It looked like a standard room from a multi-tenant building.

All of the furniture had been removed, so the square space looked like a concrete cage.

He did not need to think about where he had seen this before.

A special tool was set up prominently in the center of the room.

"A guillotine…"

It had no blood on it and the blade shined as if it was brand new, so Higashikawa could not tell if it had actually been used in an attraction or not.

Anzai let out a heavy sigh and said, "There are a few other attraction stages. Or at least rooms altered to resemble them. But unsurprisingly, we haven't found that domed stadium or Corpse Island."

"The stages that are too large to fit indoors might be nearby outside," said Hotaru while fidgeting with her black hair.

That idea gave Higashikawa a very bad feeling.

"So we've been brought to the place that soaked up all of that blood in those attractions?"

"The only place that makes no sense is the Hell Hospital," said Harumi with a shrug. "We never saw it in any of those attraction movies."

"Come to think of it…"

The Hell Hospital had originally been the location where lobotomies were performed. That likely had nothing to do with these attractions. And if they were going to create an attraction for the Hell Hospital's operating room, it would normally involve sadistic rules involving surgical equipment.

Anzai cut in to say, "At any rate, the person behind this had to have been involved in incidents all across Japan to acquire those videos."

"All across Japan?"

"That's right."

"But I thought all of the attraction stages were here?"

"The Hell Hospital had an original. The actual incident happened there. In that case, doesn't it make sense to assume everything else here is a reproduction of the facilities in which incidents across Japan happened? The detail of these stages is too much to simply be basing it off of information from talk shows or tabloids. *I get the feeling whoever is behind this was involved in the original incidents.*"

"So they first cause these horrible incidents around Japan and then create an identical stage here?"

"Yes, look."

Anzai pointed toward the guillotine in the center of the room.

The blade was glittering beautifully in the light.

Hotaru nodded and said, "It is possible that bunny girl was involved behind the scenes with the Hell Hospital incident. It is almost as if they are causing these incidents just to increase the 'value' of this place."

If that was the case…

Higashikawa bluntly stated the question that floated up in his mind.

"But what do they hope to gain by gathering these model rooms?"

"We have not figured that part out yet," said Harumi.

It was true that the incident in the real Hell Hospital had been very different from the attraction Higashikawa and the others had been forced to go through using those handguns.

The stage had been thoroughly arranged and fine-tuned to perfection, but then the most important pillar had been switched out with something else.

Higashikawa almost groaned as he said, "It just doesn't fit. *Could there be a meaning in having it not make sense?*"

"Not make sense, hm?" muttered Anzai quietly.

But unlike Higashikawa who was completely at a loss, Anzai almost sounded like that had given him an idea.

Hotaru sighed.

"If you include those monitor videos, this is an incredibly large scale project. Whoever is behind this must find it to be very important."

They checked through the facility for a bit longer, but they could not find any sort of exit.

They found a few doors that would not open, but they would not budge no matter how hard they pushed or pulled. They began to suspect the doors had been sealed up with concrete after Player 1 and Player 2 had been thrown in or that the doors were only a part of the wall made to look like a door.

"But the people behind this had to have gotten in here to set this place up, right?" said Higashikawa.

"We just have to pray they didn't seal up the single exit with concrete after the preparations were complete," replied Anzai.

"There might be a secret door!" suggested Harumi.

"Even if there is, they would have at least locked it," pointed out Hotaru.

They could find no hint, so they turned around to return to the bar.

But on their way, they found someone rummaging through the shelves in the shopping mall. It was the college-aged cabaret club girl. Higashikawa was fairly certain her name was Yakushiji Aisu. She threw several small boxes into the cart next to her.

Higashikawa honestly asked, “What are you doing?”

“I need bandages and disinfectant to treat Kozue and the other woman’s wounds. Fortunately, we have plenty to work with here. We need to take whatever we can use.”

Higashikawa was not the only one to frown at that.

Hotaru gave a cautious look around and said, “Can we really use the products here? What if they have been tampered with?”

“That is of course a possibility. But if we use some reagents, we can tell if it’s safe or not.”

“Reagents…?”

Anzai seemed confused, but Aisu continued as if it was nothing.

"Even kids in elementary school know purple cabbage can be used in place of litmus paper. You can test for quite a lot of things with just some everyday items."

From the way Aisu spoke, it was clear this was not something she just had a passing knowledge of. It was possible she was in the college of science at her university.

Hotaru placed her index finger on her chin and tilted her head slightly.

"So do you think you can manage?"

"Just leave it to me," replied Aisu offhandedly before adding something else in a quieter voice. "And I need to make sure to treat that Hiyama woman. Even if I didn't have much of a choice, I still hit her with that fire extinguisher."

Higashikawa and the others filled the cart with the fruits, vegetables, and seasonings she indicated. Higashikawa had no idea how each of them could be made into a reagent.

After gathering what they needed, they headed back to the bar.

The high school girl named Matsumi frowned when she saw the full shopping cart.

"What's all this? Is it time to eat?"

"Treating the injured comes first. Let's see, I need to create some reagents, so first I need this portable camping stove…"

After Yakushiji Aisu, the science student who would fit in at a cabaret club, said that, Kazakami grabbed an apple from the shopping cart and bit into it.

"This isn't all that fresh. It's really dry."

"Didn't I just say I need those to make reagents out of!? What if it's poisoned!?"

“Poisoned!? Wait...Is that why it tastes so bad!?”

“At least you seem to have plenty of energy!” said Harumi.

Yakushiji Aisu prepared the reagents almost entirely on her own. She chopped and squeezed out vegetables and roasted them on the portable stove, but Higashikawa could not imagine what components she was trying to draw out.

After she finally confirmed the safety of the disinfectant and bandages, she began treating the injured .

First came Kusaka Kozue.

“Gh…!! Th-that stings. That really stings!!”

“Yes, yes, but you’re not a child that needs a shampoo hat. In fact, I’ve heard people who are truly in bad shape do not feel any pain. This means you’re doing quite well. ”

“At least you seem to have plenty of energy!”

"Harumi, I don't think we can get through this with that alone!!"

And then Hiyama Tomoko.

She had received a blow to the head, so Aisu simply arbitrarily applied the disinfectant and bandages and then pressed a bag filled with ice against her head.

However, it seemed even that little bit helped a lot.

Hiyama brought her hand up to the bag of ice Higashikawa was holding in place and then sighed.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I feel fully conscious and my senses have not numbed . I am no expert, but I think I should be fine."

"But you were hit on the head," said Matsumi.

Rachel also spoke up from a short distance away.

"I-if only you could get a proper examination."

"Either way, we have to get out of here first," said Kazakami offhandedly before grabbing a snack out of the shopping cart.

Yakushiji Aisu had deemed the food safe, so they could eat it without worrying.

The biggest surprise came from Player 2. Hasegawa Hotaru, the tall college girl with long black hair, opened a bag of sugary cereal. Higashikawa had gotten the impression she was more of a cool beauty than that.

While being treated, Kusaka Kozue spoke with a distant look in her eyes.

"Hotaru is a romanticist."

"That has nothing to do with hunger."

"That's right, it doesn't! So don't hog that sugary cereal, Hotaru. Pass it over here!!"

"I may be in liberal arts, but I'm not above punching someone."

"Hey, are you sure she's a romanticist?"

After the two injured people had been treated, their attention naturally turned toward the leftover products. Higashikawa had not expected to be hungry in a situation like this, but his stomach quickly started demanding food after he took a bite of canned pineapple.

With a meaningless triumphant look, Kazakami said, " See? You really are hungry!!"

"Maybe our mental hunger and physical hunger are a bit out of sync… Come to think of it, how long has it been since all this began?" muttered Rachel as she nibbled on the edge of a rusk.

The little tidbits of conversation gradually grew.

"That was a horrible job…"

"Really, we should have been more suspicious when Harumi told us about the job! She's the type to politely step on every single landmine!!"

"Hey, it was not my fault. Tell them, Anzai-kun!"

"I suppose if you compare it to that corpse-washing job at the hospital, that tuna-gathering job at the train station, or that deep forest search party…"

"What kind of ridiculous world have the two of you been living in while we haven't seen you?"

The conversation naturally spread through the members of Player 2 first. They had already known each other, so their threshold was of course lower than that of the Player 1 members who had only just met.

With a sports drink in hand, Matsumi sat down next to Higashikawa who was sitting on the floor battling a can of pineapples. While showing a bit of concern about her short skirt, she said, "It seems they all go to the same university."

"Yeah?"

"But we had no idea who anyone was. We could have lied during our introductions."

Higashikawa wondered why she was bringing that up now.

He did not catch on to how odd it was that she felt the need to state something that should be obvious.

Which is why he smoothly replied, “We somehow managed to work together. We managed to rely on each other.”

“…” Matsumi glanced over at Higashikawa. “We don’t know anyone’s background.”

“Does that really matter? Our academic backgrounds and savings mean nothing here. It doesn’t matter what kind of titles we have.”

“Then…”

Matsumi started to say something, but she trailed off.

She looked around cautiously before speaking in a lower voice.

“What if one of the organizers is mixed in with us?”

“Eh? But that can’t be, can it?” muttered Higashikawa as if the possibility had only occurred to him now. And then, “We would need to find out where they stand. I’m willing to use anyone that might be useful.”

"You idiot. We should just gang up on them and beat them to a pulp."

"I doubt this situation is set up so that would help us. And from the way you put it, we wouldn't know why they're mixed in."

"…Why they're mixed in?"

Matsumi frowned and Higashikawa used his chin to point at the members of Player 2.

"Remember what happened with them? If this hypothetical person is a real spy or they're trying to get in our way, that's one thing. But what if they were thrown into this attraction as a penalty for betraying the organizers or something? I doubt we would actually be able to make an ally of them, but they would make a reliable ally if we could. They would know the organizers' methods and any hidden circumstances."

"…Hm."

Matsumi sipped on her sports drink and looked away from Higashikawa for some reason.

She then slowly scooted away from him while still sitting.

"You're too soft."

"?"

Higashikawa was confused.

And then…

It was as if they had waited for the moment when they let their guard down due to the minimal first aid and food.

A change came over the laptops placed in front of the three chairs at each of the several round tables.

The information and images from the Hell Hospital disappeared and they all began displaying the same image.

That image was…

"Ha haaa haaa!! Oh, dear. What a shame. The attraction to lead Player 1 and Player 2 to kill each other ended in failure."

It was a face they all recognized.

However, they had never actually met this person.

Before being taken here, they had seen this person in charge of those countless deadly attractions shown in the monitor videos.

“The bunny girl!!”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious. But Higashikawa-san, you and the rest of Player 1 setting foot in the bar holds great meaning. And I’m sure Player 2 knows very well what that is.”

“!!”

Aisu, the woman who looked like cabaret club girl and had been handling the attractions for Player 1, gave a frightened start. Were they to receive some sort of punishment if the attraction failed?

“But we have our own circumstances,” continued the bunny girl. “This is still not enough for us. What a problem, what a problem.”

“What are you saying?”

"You don't need to know. Anyway, we will give you a chance to get back in the game. I will personally let you enjoy a top rate attraction. You should thank me from the bottom of your hearts."

An attraction.

An unpleasant feeling ran down Higashikawa's spine as soon as he heard that term. And he was likely not alone. In a very short period of time, the meaning of that word had changed drastically.

But the bunny girl on the screens did not stop speaking.

She could not be stopped.

With a smile on her face, she continued playing the role of host.

"Now then, pay careful attention to the giant monitor to your left."

The room was made to look like a bar and one wall was covered by a giant monitor used for decorative lighting.

Higashikawa did not want to look.

His peripheral vision was enough to tell him it showed a close up of the bunny girl. And he knew it would soon be used to display some horrible, inhumane, and nonsensical rules.

But what actually happened greatly exceeded his expectations.

With a great noise, the giant monitor suddenly burst apart and the bunny girl jumped out.

“
W-w-waaaa

"Fwah hah hah!! Thanks for the nice reaction. … Kazakami-san, you didn't piss yourself, did you?"

"Fweh!? Wha-? You…? Wha-? From the screen!?"

"C'mon. This isn't a horror movie. There was a small room behind a flat screen monitor."

"…!!!???"

Kazakami's mouth wordlessly flapped opened and closed while too overwhelmed to move.

Meanwhile, a hand grabbed the wooden stick from a disassembled floor lamp that Kazakami had dropped.

It was Anzai Kyousuke, the only male member of Player 2.

However…

The bunny girl did not even look in his direction.

"Aaanzaaai-shwaaan."

"…"

She spoke just before he charged at her.

That was all it took for Anzai's shoulders to jump.

"You could view this situation as a question. Is that really your answer, Anzai-san?"

"My…answer?"

"What I mean is…"

The bunny girl finally looked toward Anzai.

But only with a sidelong glance.

The oozing color in her eyes held him in place.

"If you gang up on me when I suddenly appear, do you really think you will all be able to escape safely? *Is that how you think this attraction works? Do you think the rules are that simple?"*

The attraction.

The rules.

Both Player 1 and Player 2 knew all too well what the penalty was for breaking those rules.

No one had explained the rules to them.

And yet they would be penalized if they stepped outside of them.

Not knowing the rules meant they could not even try to outwit the maker of the rules. They were at an overwhelming disadvantage.

"…Do it," muttered Kazakami as he sat on the floor. His voice quickly grew into an explosive shout. "Do it!! The piece of shit toying with our lives is standing right there! She isn't on a screen or behind some protective wall. She's right here!! So!!"

"Oh, dear. Kazakami-san, you become a lot more forceful as soon as it isn't you who will be dirtying your hands. It may be against the rules, but it will of course not be you who is punished. *Not you*."

She insisted on repeating those last two words.

As if to shake off those words, Hotaru from Player 2 spoke up.

"You are one of the organizers, so whatever the rules are, won't this ridiculous attraction end as long as we neutralize you?"

"Neutralize! Oh, what a wonderful word!! You never say 'defeat' or 'kill', so you feel no guilt!! Allies of justice find that word so useful!! But," added the bunny girl, " what makes you think I am one of the organizers?"

"…"

Those words seemed to make all of their hearts contract unnaturally tight.

The ten members of Player 1 and Player 2 had been divided up by the organizers and forced into an unreasonable conflict with each other. Cruelty could be seen in the entire setup.

"Well, I'll admit I am not some poor victim, but do you really think a soldier on the front lines controls everything? In a situation like this where you beat people up the instant you find them, like Kusaka Kozue-san

here? Do you really think the person who controls everything would leave safety to come here? *Surely that is not your answer."*

Yes.

Preparing this stage and gathering the ten of them did not seem possible for an individual. Some powerful organization existed behind the bunny girl. And those organizers had created the attraction's rules and were now ensuring it was carried out.

Killing the bunny girl would not bring this to an end.

And if the attraction continued after her death, they would of course be penalized for it.

Otherwise, the bunny girl would never had left safety.

They simply had to think of it from her point of view.

What idiot would come unarmed to a scene where she was outnumbered?

Who would choose that?

"Okay. If you have all come to your own conclusions, it is time to see if you can stay in the game."

"Hey, wait a second. We-…!!"

"Higashikawa-san?" the bunny girl grinned. "You are free to choose not to participate. However, think of this like a quiz show. Can a performer win if he is not sitting in the answer seat? No matter how smart he is, he has no chance of victory if he cannot press the answer button."

And…

What did it mean if they lost in this attraction?

"…"

None of them could move.

They had free use of all four limbs and yet none of them could move an inch.

The bunny girl alone could move. She lightheartedly toyed with one long ear of her costume.

"Okay, let's get the preparations over with. Your names have been entered into the drinking counter. Think of the spot with your name as your answer seat for the quiz. Please go stand in your spot."

The ten of them all exchanged a glance.

This was the final line.

Would they rebel or would they obey?

While propping herself up on Rachel's shoulder, Hiyama weakly shook her head.

"We have too little information. The penalty could be our deaths."

"But if we take her hostage…"

"Higashikawa-saaan. Is that your answer? Well, if it is, then do as you like."

The bunny girl brought her hands behind her back, turned her back to Higashikawa, and held her hands out toward him while wiggling her butt back and forth.

She seemed to be just waiting for someone to break the rules.

After finally getting over his shock, Kazakami slowly stood up, but Matsumi silently held out an arm to block his path.

She was telling him not to give into the temptation.

Even if they were going to rebel, this was not the time.

The ten members of both Player 1 and Player 2 all stood in front of their “answer seats”.

The bunny girl smiled and said, “Okay, the preparations are complete.”

She clapped her hands together in front of her chest.

And she tilted her head to the side slightly.

“Just so you know, there was no rule protecting me here.”

As soon as she said that, all stability disappeared below Higashikawa’s feet. It was a pitfall. By the time he realized it, he had completely vanished from the bar.

And it was not just him.

All ten of them had fallen at the exact same moment.

“Wha-!?”

After falling about three meters, Higashikawa’s fall ended abruptly. He was dangling in midair while wrapped in some kind of transparent film that was hanging from a thick wire.

This was like a giant version of the plastic bags used to hold goldfish caught in a festival goldfish scooping game .

Higashikawa’s body weight had caused the wire to tightly close off the opening of the bag, so he had no way out. And he was not about to try to break his way through the thick plastic material.

The reason for this was quite simple.

“…Y-you’re kidding me!!”

It was Kozue who managed to force those words out through her dry throat.

She was looking straight down.

All that could be seen there was a deep darkness. No floor or ground was visible. It was unclear how deep the pit was, but it was at least more than 10 or 20 meters. It was blatantly obvious what would happen to someone dropped from that height.

A great ravine.

Or a window washer's scaffold.

The height brought those images strongly to mind. That overwhelming depth, the feeling of dangling from a single wire, and the unsteady footing of plastic all filled them with terror.

The bunny girl's voice could be heard coming from somewhere.

"Now then. All of you should have a single card in your bag. It is an important item, so handle it with care."

Higashikawa felt around in the darkness and felt something solid. It was hard to see in the dim light, but it

seemed to be a card with red on one side and black on the opposite side. It had no numbers, symbols, or illustrations.

"What is this card?" muttered Kazakami.

The bunny girl replied, "The action you must take is simple, but the rules are a bit complicated. I will not repeat myself, so please pay close attention."

"…What are you going to have us do?" said Harumi.

"On my signal, all of you are to hold your card out. It' ll be a 'ready, set, go!' kind of thing. But it is up to you which side of the card you have facing forward. The next part is very important."

And…

She explained the worst possible rules.

"Anyone who chooses red will survive. But if everyone chooses red, you will all be killed, so be careful. Anyone who chooses black will be killed. But if everyone chooses black, every single one of you will survive. If you do not all choose the same color, only those who chose black will be killed."

"But…" Anzai was bewildered as he dangled in midair like the others. "But anyone would choose red in that situation! That ensures you survive! How is this an attraction!?"

"But if you all choose red, you all die. If you all take the easy path, you will all be killed."

"But…" exclaimed Aisu while at a loss for words.

If nine of the ten chose red, the greatest number could be saved. However, if that last person chose red too, there would be zero survivors.

They would all be killed.

In this situation, their wire would likely be severed to send them to the bottom of the abyss.

"Uuh…" groaned Hiyama.

This was probably more than just her wounds hurting. She may have imagined something unpleasant.

Higashikawa had done the same. He had pictured the scene of a tomato in a plastic bag smashing against asphalt. The color red was splattered across the inside of the transparent plastic.

"B-but if we all choose black, we all live, right?" said Matsumi who was sitting in the bottom of her bag out of concern for her miniskirt. "So we just all have to choose black, right?"

Kazakami mockingly replied, "If nine of us choose black and the last person chooses red, it's all over! Nine of us die and the traitor gets to live on. Red is a sure thing! You'll definitely be saved!! We have no guarantee that all of us would be able to resist that sure thing when it comes down to it!"

"Well, it seems you understand the situation," said the bunny girl. "Will you try for all black and make fools of yourselves or will you compromise with red and die? Which way you take this is part of the attraction!"

The bunny girl seemed to be enjoying herself.

It was as if this suffering had been carefully calculated out.

"Okay, your time starts now. The judgment will begin in 10 minutes. You can discuss, threaten, persuade, or beg however you like until then. …Then again, the optimum solution has already been suggested"

Having said that, the bunny girl's voice disappeared completely.

The optimum solution.

All black.

It was simple enough to say. Anyone would choose it as a theoretical answer. But lives were on the line here. Their own lives were on the line.

The problem was that choosing red would certainly save an individual.

"Black…is best, right? If we all choose black…!!" said Kozue to brush aside her unease.

Kazakami once again gave the rebuttal.

"Like I said, red is a sure thing."

"But if we're going to be saved by red, someone has to sacrifice themselves!!" said Harumi.

"I'm not saying we should all choose red to save ourselves! Red is a sure thing, but if all ten of us choose it , we're all dead. If we say we're going for all black, the group that chooses red at the last second will definitely be saved!!"

"We wouldn't do that!!"

"What proof of that do we have!? Winning with red is easier than winning with black. As long as one sacrifice is tricked into choosing black, the rest of you get to survive! !"

The rest of you.

Higashikawa had no idea what basis Kazakami was using to divide them up.

But he felt Kazakami's fears were hitting at the true meaning of this attraction.

Suggesting they all choose black and agreeing on it in a strategy meeting were easy enough to do. It was based

in the fundamental goodness of humanity, so it felt good to agree to it.

But once the lid was opened, was it possible no goodness would be found?

Was it possible Higashikawa alone would choose black and the rest would choose red?

They did not know each other well enough to feel united.

And that was not just due to the division between Player 1 and Player 2.

Even within Player 1, the bonds between Higashikawa , Kazakami, Matsumi, Hiyama, and Rachel were not strong enough to know anything for sure.

And…

Even as he considered the complicated rules, Higashikawa also thought of what would happen after the fact.

It was near impossible for them all to choose black.

So if someone chose red and survived, what happened then?

What if it was not an extreme situation of 9 and 1? What if it was 5 and 5? What if half were killed and half survived?

Would there be any trust left between the survivors?

They had been unable to handle that bunny girl with all ten of them united, so what could the survivors do with their trust destroyed?

That was the point of this attraction.

Player 1 and Player 2 had been set up to kill each other , but they had met and united instead. This was the first step toward destroying that union so that they would fight amongst each other once more.

In all likelihood, the bunny girl and the other organizers did not expect them to all choose red and die.

Nor did the bunny girl and the other organizers expect them to all choose black and survive.

They expected something in between.

It could be 7 and 3, 6 and 4, or 5 and 5.

Instead of all red or all black, only the sly would survive. The single group would be destroyed and broken into multiple individuals.

"…Ah."

After thinking over the jumble of thoughts in his head, Higashikawa Mamoru realized a fundamental fact.

"Ahhhh.
Aaaaaaaahhhh

He knew the true purpose of this balancing act of an attraction using red and black cards. He knew who the true target was.

Before coming here, Higashikawa had purposefully pretended to betray Player 1 and join Player 2 so that he could avoid a conflict between the two groups. He had destroyed the power balance to prevent a 50/50 fight, but that had proven something to the others.

It had proven Higashikawa Mamoru was willing to betray his group.

He had resolved the situation back then. He had managed to keep it at a level where the others knew he reluctantly did it to ensure they all survived.

However…

What if Higashikawa chose red and survived in this attraction?

His justification disappeared.

He had said he did it for the sake of all 10 of them before, but this would show he would not hesitate to betray others for his own sake.

Even if multiple people survived by choosing red, Higashikawa Mamoru could not join them.

He would be the only one to have betrayed his group more than once.

And what would happen to him once he was driven out of the group?

He would be isolated.

And it would not end there.

The others would not want the traitor causing any more problems. They would want stability. They would want to come up with a definite plan to eliminate the uncertain element.

And if that happened…

The other attraction participants would be as much his enemy as the bunny girl and the other organizers. If he

was isolated as the attractions continued, he would have every disadvantage forced onto him. It was even possible he would be beaten to death before the next attraction even began.

Higashikawa Mamoru could not win by choosing red.

The only way he could win was with black.

(But…)

A cold sweat poured from his face and he gritted his teeth.

(But!!)

If he told them all to choose black, who would go along with it?

Even if some did, it did not matter unless every single one of them did.

If even a single person chose red, it was all over.

And that was exactly the point at which the strategy meeting was stuck.

It was impossible for them to all survive by choosing black.

In that case…

In that case, what could Higashikawa do?

Even if he won with red, he would have no hope afterwards.

Even if he tried to win with black, someone would choose red and he would die.

Ultimately, that was what the bunny girl was after.

When Player 1 and Player 2 had been about to clash, Higashikawa Mamoru had used the traitor card to avoid the conflict. There had been a chance that would isolate him sooner or later.

That was why the organizers had lost interest.

They had no interest in watching when they knew how it would turn out. And so they had prepared an attraction where Higashikawa Mamoru would be destroyed no matter what he chose.

And…

That meant…

(There's no hope for me? Every single one of my options is nothing but choosing between different cruel deaths?)

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Higashikawa Mamoru felt some sort of intense emotion swirling in his gut.

It was not simply anger.

It was not simply fear.

In fact, it was something that made him feel like he would burst out laughing if he let his guard down. He felt like his stomach was filled with boiling water, but he also felt a mysterious pleasure and ecstasy.

Higashikawa himself did not know how to classify the feeling.

However…

He felt the rails of his thoughts switching over. The usual thoughts of trying to avoid death were swapped out for something completely different.

He could not be saved.

He could not be saved.

He could not be saved.

In that case, what should he hope for in this final attraction?

A high score.

With that goal set, his thoughts moved at tremendous speed. His instincts and bodily limiters may have been out of order because his vision grew oddly bright and wide. The great torrent of tension and emotion may have been affecting the dilation of his eyes, but that did not matter.

He would give that bunny girl a shock.

He set his top priority according to this feeling that was neither hatred nor joy. With that priority, what was the best way to use his red or black card?

He found his answer almost immediately. It was quite simple.

As long as he ignored his own survival, that is.

“Listen.”

The other nine seemed to be observing Higashikawa’s odd state from a distance.

Isolating himself from the group should have been what he avoided at all costs.

However…

When he knew he could not survive, this way was more convenient.

Higashikawa Mamoru took a single breath and then spoke a decisive statement.

"I will choose black."

"Have you even been listening?" asked Kazakami in irritation. He was frustrated at having to argue the same thing again and again. "Even if you say that, you have no proof every single other person will choose black too!!"

"I know that," cut in Higashikawa. And he added one more decisive statement. "The rest of you should choose red. That will minimize the sacrifices!!"

He heard someone gasp.

He had no way of knowing if it was simply out of shock or if it was also out of relief over a surefire method of saving oneself.

He did not care either way.

"You don't have to think about choosing black. You just have to assume choosing red will save you! If we all choose red, it's all over. But if I choose black, you don't have to worry about that possibility!!"

"Why…?" said Hotaru while looking at Higashikawa as if she could not believe what she was seeing.

That was the obvious reaction.

With this plan, there was zero chance of Higashikawa surviving.

Kazakami had been left dumbfounded, but he now clenched his teeth and shouted, "I don't believe you. If you choose black alone, you'll die!! At the last second, you'll-…!!"

"What good would playing red at the last second do me? That would just mean we all die. Whether I choose red or black, I will die. What do I gain by betraying you in that situation!?"

"…May I ask why you are doing this?" asked Hiyama, but Higashikawa gave no answer.

Instead he said, "Whatever any of you say, I am playing black. I've already made up my mind. …Listen, if you all choose red, you will all survive. Or will you all gamble on black? I promise you that everyone who chooses black will die along with me. If you want a sure thing and if you truly want to survive, then do not hesitate to choose red. Understand?"

He would not be saved.

He could not be saved.

As that truth permeated his chest, he began to see an odd new objective. He did not want to die for no reason. He wanted the odd sense of accomplishment of someone who tore of his own flesh to feed a starving child.

It was nothing more than an illusion.

It was nothing more than an escape.

But giving up on this attraction had given him an option he could not have seen otherwise. Even as an

unpleasant sweat poured from his entire body, Higashikawa clung to that objective.

It was as if he was doing his best to avert his gaze from his approaching death.

"Listen! All of you choose red! That will definitely save you!! I'm not telling you to trust me. But anyone who chooses black will look like an idiot! Don't forget that!!"

And the nine-against-one structure Higashikawa's death would create would not be the structure of betrayal and suspicion that the bunny girl wanted.

After all, Higashikawa was no longer part of Player 1 or Player 2.

This was 5 and 4 and 1. After using betrayal to avoid the conflict between the two groups, he had been left hanging in between.

What would happen if he was sacrificed here?

The group would not split. They would either have eliminated the traitor or they would feel a mutual guilt over sacrificing a single person to save themselves. Player 1 and Player 2 would truly unite.

He was guiding the attraction's result away from what the bunny girl and the other organizers wanted.

(This is the only way for me to win.)

He could not avoid being taken out of the running.

He would die no matter what he chose.

He had accepted that. He had no choice but to accept it . And after accepting it, this was the only place he could put up his final fight. This was all he had left.

(I won't let that horrible bunny girl have her way!! I'll guide this away from the path she is imagining! As long as I can do that…!!)

"Hey!!"

With sweat pouring from his face and bloodshot eyes, Higashikawa looked over at Anzai.

And he shouted.

"This is the end for me. But promise me one thing. Promise me there will be no more Player 1 and Player 2! *From here on, you're the protagonist!* Escape here not just with your friends, but with everyone else too!! Do everything you can to achieve that! Make sure you do that!!"

"Your time is up," said the bunny girl after her long silence.

She did not sound worried.

Her top priority was the elimination of Higashikawa Mamoru who the organizers had grown tired of. That would still happen, so those monitoring them had no reason to be worried.

Or so they thought.

Higashikawa felt they were naïve.

Even if it was decided he would die, he could still choose how he died. At the very end, Higashikawa had realized that.

And so he would not lose.

Even if he died, he would not lose.

“Have you made up your minds? Have you put together your strategy? Do you think you can win? Do you think things will go as you hope? Well, whatever your answer, the time has come. Get your cards ready, everyone. Think of it like the referee displaying a card in soccer. No saying you meant to display the other side after the fact. Anyone who refuses to display their card will be killed. If you understand, then grab your cards.”

There were ten of them.

All of their lives held equal value and they each had a single card to entrust their fate to.

Higashikawa Mamoru.

Hiyama Tomoko.

Kazakami Shinzou.

Matsumi Shirauo.

Rachel Skydance.

Anzai Kyousuke.

Harumi Quartervalley.

Hasegawa Hotaru.

Kusaka Kozue.

Yakushiji Aisu.

“Ready, set…”

The bunny girl’s cheerful voice sounded horribly out of place.

And it was their final signal.

“Go!!”

With a stiff smile, Higashikawa Mamoru displayed the black side of his card forward.

And the other nine chose…

Part 3

A few seconds passed.

Silence filled the area.

Higashikawa's erratic breathing and pounding heart sounded unusually loud to him. He had chosen his own death. Instead of avoiding it, he had chosen it himself. His mind was horribly clear. All worldly thoughts had disappeared from it and no hint of human feelings remained.

This may have been the mental state of someone who jumped from a tall building or subway platform.

(It's over.)

He muttered those words in his heart as well as under his breath.

It was over.

When would his fear return? As Higashikawa wondered that, he realized the fear did not seem to be returning at all. He only felt an odd heat swirling in his head. Some important part of the nerves in his brain may have already been fried and he would never regain the ability to think normally.

When the actual task of killing him began and he felt unimaginable pain, the fear might return.

Or he may have been broken beyond the point of feeling pain.

"…"

His breaths were sometimes shallow and sometimes deep.

Finally, the other bags hanging down entered into Higashikawa's vision.

They looked just like the bags used to hold goldfish.

The thick, transparent plastic and the thick wire made for an extremely unreliable gondola.

Higashikawa looked over to view the result…and then he froze.

Hiyama was contained in the neighboring bag.

He had seen the color of her card.

It was black.

For an instant…

For just an instant…

The unpleasant heat in Higashikawa's head disappeared. He could not process what he was seeing.

And after a few seconds, it finally hit him.

He realized what it meant.

"You-…!!"

His strategy had failed. Not all of the other nine had chosen red. This was a pointless death. He had no idea why she had done it, but Hiyama would simply be killed along with him.

But…

His expectations were overturned even further.

When he looked again, Hiyama was not the only one to choose black. Anzai, Matsumi, and Rachel had too.

More needless deaths.

Once half of them died, the survivors would be suspicious of each other. This would kill all of them, just more slowly.

But he was wrong again.

There were even more.

"Eh…?"

He looked around.

He looked around again.

He finally realized that every single card was the same color. It was not just that a few had chosen black. All 10 participants had chosen black. Every card was black as if it had been arranged ahead of time.

(Why?)

That simple question filled Higashikawa's mind.

This was the best result, but he had seen no way for it to happen.

"We had no choice," spat out Kazakami. "You were going on about choosing black on your own, so there was no other way to save 'us'."

"You could say we woke up," continued Hotaru. " That bunny girl set up all sorts of rules, but there was never more than one option."

"Your conviction to choose black no matter what gave us the push we needed," said Harumi.

Matsumi then said, "To be honest, I was hesitant to not choose red. But then I wondered what I would do in the future attractions if I survived alone. I need to use anyone that might be useful."

"From our position running the attractions, we saw you working together to complete them," added Aisu.

Kozue said, "If you had not stepped in when the Player 1 and Player 2 structure collapsed, I would have died. It felt wrong to not repay that debt."

"We may have argued about a lot in the attraction." Anzai let out a slow sigh after he was sure everyone had

chosen black. “But those conflicts were necessary for us to all survive. Once someone decided to choose black, it was obvious what we had to do.”

“…”

It was simple.

It was a simple truth.

Higashikawa Mamoru had put together his strategy on the assumption that he would not survive. With that assumption, the high score was the survival of the other nine and the elimination of any source of conflict.

But…

They had thought about it differently.

It had not been about whether they would survive themselves.

It was about whether everyone would survive or not.

While Higashikawa had quickly given up, the others had continued to struggle for total survival.

That was why they had come to an impasse and why they had argued.

Seeing the all black result finally woke Higashikawa up. The self-sacrificial thought processes he had built up to escape the fear of death came crumbling down.

He was not strong or clever.

He had simply looked away.

The ones who deserved that award were the other nine who had continued arguing while never giving up on their ultimate objective.

"You may have been imagining this as 9 against 1 or 5 against 4 against 1," said Hiyama as she held her injury. "But we are simply 10. And it is all thanks to you betraying us all to protect us all."

Higashikawa could find no words to speak.

As he sat there in a daze, he heard the bunny girl's voice.

"Ooookay… Kind of unexpected, but I'll announce the attraction's result anyway."

She was disappointed.

Dejection filled her voice.

And then the true cruelty of the attraction showed itself.

"Hiyama Tomoko-san, Kazakami Shinzou-san, Matsumi Shirauo-san, Rachel Skydance-san, Anzai Kyousuke-san, Harumi Quartervalley-san, Hasegawa Hotaru-san, Kusaka Kozue-san, and Yakushiji Aisu-san. *According to the rules of the attraction, the above nine people will be killed.*"

"……
……
……Ah?"

This was more than a splash of cold water to the face.

Every thought in his mind was cut off.

A noise escaped his mouth, but it held no meaning.

This truly unreasonable and unexpected turn of events sealed off even a shout.

"Why?" muttered Higashikawa finally.

He could feel his entire body trembling. The unpleasant heat swirling in his head before was completely gone. Now he felt like the core of his body was filled with icy water.

"Like hell that's the result!! We all chose black!! Every single one of us!! Why does that mean the other nine have to be killed!?"

"Oh?" said the bunny girl in obvious mockery. Hers was the voice of someone who had not been damaged in the slightest. "The rules said the following: If you do not all choose the same color, only those who chose black will be killed."

"And!?"

"And," repeated the bunny girl. "Higashikawa-san, your card is a very dark brown."

He felt like his entire personality had been wiped clean .

The ridiculous situation caused his tear glands to writhe oddly. His expression crumbled under an odd

torrent that could not be classified under any of the standard emotions.

The card.

The card itself had been sabotaged.

He forced his trembling body to move and looked down. He looked at his own card. He observed it in the dimness.

It looked black.

It could be nothing other than black.

But…

Even so…

"Well, I don't blame you for not noticing with normal eyesight. Under the CMYK values, the magenta has been increased two or threefold. But that is still technically classified as a very dark brown. It isn't black. When the brown pigment melanin is concentrated enough, we call it black hair, but technically…technically, it is still classified as brown!!"

"D-don-…Don't mock us!!!!"

"And so you unfortunately failed to all choose black! You failed!!"

He should have thought of the possibility.

He should have been on the lookout for a trap when those cruel organizers prepared an option that would allow them all to survive.

But even if he had…

Even if he had…

"You were trying to corner me, right!? You knew I would be isolated sooner or later, so you lost interest in watching me! If you kill them, you won't be able to continue these attractions that toy with our group psychology!! Are you really fine with that!?"

"Oh, come on."

The bunny girl seemed to be enjoying herself.

She sounded like someone who had stuck an insect in a maze and was watching it as it struggled to find its way .

"You think this attraction was just for you? Just to eliminate you? *Why would we go to all this trouble just for you?* Aren't you thinking a little too highly of yourself?"

"…!!"

"Also, our objective is not to continue these attractions forever. In fact, this sudden end, this unexpected conclusion, and this unreasonable turnaround is much more important."

"What…are you saying…?'

"After all, that's the nature of the absurd."

She truly, truly seemed to be enjoying herself.

The bunny girl's voice sounded enchanted.

This was different from the mocking voice from before .

"Seeing an obvious story structure would hardly be absurd, now would it? When the cute heroine does not die and is always assumed safe, that is not absurd. If the protagonist of a two hour drama survives the entire two hours, that is not absurd. …We seek the absurd. And that is why we must destroy all of those standard assumptions."

"The absurd…?" muttered Anzai in shock. "Did you just say the absurd!?"

"Ha hah ha! It is sometimes referred to by the name Objective Alice. Securing that White Girl who is associated with the Banshee and Prometheus is no easy task. After all, this is a difficult existence to deal with. Her only rule is that no rules can govern her. Even after running an emulation experiment, our odds of success are completely unknown. But not being able to read anything about the situation may be proof that we are approaching Alice who stands in the center of the absurd ."

But Higashikawa could not guess the true meaning of those words. He did not have the mental leeway left.

He had misread the enemy's objective.

The bunny girl had not set up the attraction using red and black cards in order to eliminate Higashikawa.

That was why he had failed.

That was why he had failed…or was it?

“Now then, now then! I am sure you have all vaguely realized it by now, but you are going to die!! This is quite an absurd turn of events, don’t you think!?”

Higashikawa’s footing shook.

After that vibration of another arm latching on, the wire began to be reeled in.

He was being taken up.

He alone was being taken away from death. He alone was being lifted up to safety.

“Wait…”

Higashikawa had tried to save the other nine by choosing black and having them choose red.

The other nine had all chosen black despite the danger so they could save him.

The killing was beginning.

“
Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaiii

What Each Person Held

Hiyama Tomoko had worked toward taking revenge against the theory of a certain respected scholar in a distant country by approaching that scholar as the perfect beauty. The scholar's theory said that criminals were raised by their environment, so one needed to be wary of people with similar life courses to historical criminals. She had wanted to give off intentionally sensational but incorrect hints to strike down that scholar from the scientific community. However, that was not a logical reason to come to a world-famous amusement park. Hiyama looked down on that scholar she hated so much, but it seemed her personality was not mechanical enough for that to be the whole of her life.

Kazakami Shinzou had lived without the help of a home or owning any land. While working for Direct Transportation, he had found himself shipping *a suspicious package that stank of blood*. He had begun investigating it and had ended up at this amusement park. He had been unable to hide his irritation at not finding any answers or possibly having fallen for a trap.

He had grown violent, but the organizers had simply used that for their own ends. That had frustrated him all the more.

Matsuo Shirauo had come here to discover who she was. She had not expected it to be anything so dangerous, but she had also been relieved that the organizers had not excluded her from the danger. Even if she was considered disposable by them, she at least knew she was not one of them and anything was better than being one of them.

Rachel Skydance had found it hard to adapt to life in Japan and had hoped working at a world-famous amusement park would give her some hint of her home country. When it had turned out she had been deceived and she learned what sort of predicament she was in, she had seriously considered giving up on life. And she might have done so had she not heard that voice call out to her through the steel door while she was locked in that room with a corpse.

Anzai Kyousuke had once more been used by that group

of four college girls. However, he had begun to realize that he enjoyed being used by them in that way. His feelings regarding Player 1 that he had met today were complicated, but he doubted the violence would have stopped at that level had the situations been reversed.

Harumi Quartervalley had not given it much thought. She had been the one to find the wanted poster, but she had not been in need of money. She had thought an amusement park sounded a bit childish, but she had decided it might feel more fresh and make for some fun memories if they went there as workers rather than guests.

Hasegawa Hotaru had heard some shady rumors about Attraction Land, but she had kept quiet because it sounded like fun. She had been surprised when her position switched from observer to participant, but that had simply meant she needed to switch her thinking over to achieving the happy ending that the organizers would least want.

Kusaka Kozue had been afraid to be left out. She felt

safest with the structure of the four girls (+ one boy), so she had done her best to defend that structure. But she had been saved by some strange guy and the five had suddenly grown to ten. She had been confused at first, but she soon found it was not a bad change.

Yakushiji Aisu had wanted to save up money so she could visit Guam during winter break. She was what was known as a genius, so she was quite skilled. However, her abilities only ever showed themselves in the things she had a strong interest in. She periodically needed some new stimuli. That had been the reason for the winter trip to Guam and in a way it had been the reason for the part-time job as well.

Those nine were no more.

They had all died.

This was not just the elimination of nine names or symbols. These were flesh-and-blood humans who had lived up to this point holding onto their own reasons and circumstances.

They had made a single choice to protect Higashikawa .

And their decisions had been completely overturned by the worst possible trap.

Reaper Game 05: Conclusion

Part 1

He swung his arms around as hard as he could.

He ripped apart the thick plastic material with his hands and ran out of the bag and into the bar.

The bunny girl was sitting on a random table.

Her legs were crossed and she was grinning as she looked down on Higashikawa who was breathing erratically on the floor.

“It was probably too dark to see, but there was a pool of powerful acid below. Once the wire was released and they fell in, there was no way to save them.”

“

Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
!!”

He tried to curse at her, but he could not even form such simple words.

He ignored his trembling tongue and lips, and instead simply shouted out. As the cries of beasts contained certain signals, Higashikawa's showed less intelligence than a wild beast.

He stretched out his arms in hopes of dragging the bunny girl down from the round table and climbing on top of her.

But then something happened.

The bunny girl did not actually do anything.

"…!?"

As soon as Higashikawa gathered strength in his legs to leap at her, his feet *unnaturally slipped.* He collapsed clumsily and face-first to the floor as the bunny girl grinned.

"It's no use. That attraction was quite absurd. As soon as it ended, *the preparations were complete*."

"Shut up!!!!!" He finally managed to form proper words. Higashikawa followed his emotions and spat out those words from the floor. "I'll save them… I'll save

those nine no matter what!! They took the risk of choosing black to save me after I gave up on my life! All of them did!! Every single one!! It is definitely wrong for them to be used and then killed. Why did they have to die while I survived!? That's why-…!!"

"But what are you even going to do? The stoppers for the wires were already released. They should all be dissolved down to the bone in that pool of acid. And the bones will melt away before too long."

"…!!!!!!"

Higashikawa bit his lip and the flavor of iron oozed out.

The hope inside him was no more than refusing to imagine what he had not directly seen. It was the same as closing a cat in a metal canister and thoroughly beating the canister from outside. Saying the cat might still be alive because you had not looked inside was much too evil to be called wishful thinking.

He knew that.

He knew the truth.

Yet Higashikawa Mamoru would not give up on those nine.

He refused to give up on them!

Higashikawa's thoughts circled around and around and around and around in his head like they had been tossed into a maze with no exit. Sweat poured from his body. He rolled clumsily across the floor, balled up in the fetal position, and could not move a single finger.

He was distancing his mind from any information from the outside world.

Was he focusing his thoughts or was it simply escapism?

Meanwhile, the bunny girl's expression was that of someone cleaning up the trash after having fun with some noisy fireworks.

"Hm, hm. So this is what resided within me. Well, it makes sense given the format. This is the sort of story that would lead to this absurdity being overwritten onto me."

She was saying something.

But it did not matter.

While looking down on Higashikawa who was still breathing erratically on the floor, the bunny girl broke apart one of the laptops sitting on the same round table as her. She pulled an industrial product made of colorful cords out from within.

It used a thin panel instead of a cylinder, but it resembled the time bomb used in Higashikawa's first attraction.

"This was prepared as a penalty in case you tried to access anything we didn't want. But the detailed design was outsourced, so I don't really know how it works."

Even as she said that, the bunny girl's slender fingers ripped out the colorful cords one by one.

Over half of the 20 or more cords were likely traps.

If she carelessly severed one of them, it would explode .

And yet…

"When it isn't supposed to explode, nothing can make it explode. This is not just a dud or a malfunction. When I am not supposed to lose, I cannot lose. *Those are the rules that surround me right now.*"

"…"

She was annoying.

She was a bother.

What did it matter? What did that bomb with its cords ripped out matter?

"You can think this is some kind of trick if you like. But an answer like that is not going to be enough to defeat me," said the bunny girl offhandedly.

She then tossed the silent bomb out the bar door with the carefreeness of someone tossing a magazine into the trash after reading through it.

A great roar and vibration came from the shopping mall, but Higashikawa still did not care.

What did it matter?

Would that help him save those nine?

If not, he just needed to remain silent.

Higashikawa Mamoru could not think about anything else. He could no longer think at all.

"This may be thanks to roleplaying using the storyline of gambles that toy with human lives. This goes well beyond luck or fortune. *Just by standing here, I can call in an infinite supply of success.* Perhaps this is something like being Nike, the goddess of victory in Greek mythology. Anyway, I played the dealer, so my version is for the part of the ruler. I have acquired the character of the Unbeatable Emperor from gambling stories. This is a good start, and it shows our project is progressing smoothly."

She was no longer expecting any reply from Higashikawa. She seemed to be satisfied as long as someone was there to hear her speak.

There was no reason for it. This explanation and conversation held no meaning. The bunny girl was simply doing it on a whim for self-satisfaction.

Or…

Perhaps that irresponsibility was linked to the mysterious concept of the absurd she had mentioned.

"Killing those nine has created a great current. Now we on the organizer side just have to wait for our objective to complete itself. Do you know what is important here, Higashikawa-san?"

While still lying on the ground, Higashikawa finally moved just his eyes in response to his name.

"That's right: how to deal with you."

The bunny girl's smile deepened.

It spread unnaturally far like butter melting in a frying pan.

"Now that those nine deaths have met the absurdity requirements, we have no logical reason to care about you any longer. Do you know what that means? What do you think is about to happen to you?"

Would he be saved?

Was she saying he would be let go?

After everything they did, would they not fight him or even give him any more challenges!?

“That’s right.”

The bunny girl smiled.

She smiled and smiled and smiled.

She pulled a knife from her cleavage and spun it around in her hand.

“If we used logic to decide what to do, the absurdity we went to such lengths to bring here might disperse.”

She would kill him because they had no reason to kill him.

Things were going well, so she would destroy everything.

If any logic remained, she would overturn it.

It was as if the world had been filled with a rule that made everything the opposite of what it was supposed to be.

"*She* will be here soon."

The bunny girl stood up from the round table.

She approached with a smile and a glittering blade.

"She is an aggregation of the absurd that has taken the form of a pure white girl. That absurd existence is on a completely different dimension from me.
Higashikawa-san? The situation you have fallen into is most definitely absurd. If the girl and the absurd can each affect each other, then that girl can be made to appear by preparing the absurd. Makes sense, doesn't it?
"

At this stage, Higashikawa was still lying unmoving on the floor.

It was not that he did not know what was about to happen to him.

He did not think he could avoid the blade with miraculous physical ability. Nor did he think the bunny girl was so unskilled that she could not successfully stab him.

He remained silent.

Even his breathing stopped.

He truly did not make a single noise.

"Now, Higashikawa-san. I do not know if you are simply not listening or if you have lost the ability to understand what you are hearing as words, but…this is checkmate. Farewell."

She did not hesitate.

No convenient hero rushed out to save him and no hidden ability exploded out of him at the last second.

The bunny girl's right arm swung down and brought the knife with it.

Part 2

The result was simple.

Despite having his life placed on the line, Higashikawa was not interested in what happened.

As he lay on the floor, his lips moved ever so slightly.

"…Huh?" said the bunny girl. Higashikawa did not bother looking up. "The blade fell out of the handle? No, wait, wait, wait. I already proved I have the power to never lose when I am not supposed to lose. So how…*how did you call in success here?*"

What was she saying?

Why was she still talking about that?

Higashikawa could not understand it. And that was why he muttered something while lying with his right ear pressed against the floor.

He spoke about what truly mattered.

"…*I can hear it.*"

"What?"

"I can hear a creaking noise from below the floor. Isn't that the sound of those bags hanging from the wires!?"

At the same moment, the laptops placed along the bar's tables all grew red. Warning messages displaying errors appeared on all of them. From the diagram displayed along with the errors, this seemed to be related to the bags and the pulleys and gears that controlled them.

"Due to a malfunction in the attraction's devices, they're still hanging there? And this isn't just one or two malfunctions… All nine of them malfunctioned!?"

The bunny girl snapped her fingers and all of the error messages disappeared. In their place, profiles for Higashikawa and the others appeared. The profiles included brief overviews of their qualifications and academic histories as well as records of their actions in the attractions.

It included a section titled Progress Report #201.

The material added under Initial Setup said the following:

Higashikawa Mamoru.

Viewing of and assisting in the production of snuff films.

Mutilating a corpse and instigating the same.

Hiyama Tomoko.

Viewing of and assisting in the production of snuff films.

Mutilating a corpse.

Kazakami Shinzou.

Viewing of and assisting in the production of snuff films.

Mutilating a corpse.

Matsumi Shirauo

Viewing of and assisting in the production of snuff films.

Mutilating a corpse.

Rachel Skydance

Viewing of and assisting in the production of snuff films.

Mutilating a corpse. (Unclear if she would have done so on her own.)

"I see. When we had Player 1 mutilate that corpse in the first attraction, you took that irregular action. You convinced Rachel Skydance to mutilate her corpse in order to save her. …*And that created an imbalance in the criminal charges!!* That's why!!"

"…"

The technical details did not matter.

The nine of them were still alive even if just barely.

In that case, this was no time to be lying on the ground trying to escape reality.

Higashikawa Mamoru slammed his fist down on a nearby laptop and grabbed a sharp fragment of the broken screen.

At the same time, the bunny girl pulled out a new knife and rushed at Higashikawa.

They both took action.

Higashikawa shot to his feet and thrust the sharp fragment directly at the center of the bunny girl's chest. The bunny girl swung her knife horizontally to slice through Higashikawa's throat.

However…

"!?"

"!!"

Both attacks failed.

Cracks ran through Higashikawa's shard and it shattered before reaching the bunny girl's chest.

Meanwhile, the blade of the bunny girl's knife once more slipped from the handle and stabbed into the wall to the side.

The two glared at each other from close enough to grab at each other.

As the bunny girl tossed aside the knife handle, the confidence from before had vanished.

"It looks like this just isn't going to work. At this distance, it is infinite. Even if we brought in a Gatling gun or a shoulder-fired missile, we cannot kill each other. That is simply the type of character we have been constructed as."

"…"

"All ten of you in Player 1 and Player 2 were supposed to end this as equal characters that were nothing more than gamble participants. You would never have been able to defeat the Unbeatable Emperor who was your dealer. But your irregular actions caused an imbalance in the criminal charges meant to guide in the absurd. You could say you obtained the position of a character with

the opportunity to play a special role among the participants. You could call that character the Ever-Victorious Challenger."

"And what does that mean?"

"I like that look in your eyes. You've finally worked up the will to kill me. But it's no use. The situation can never change as it is. We each have a great power that calls in success, so we will always automatically avoid death no matter how hard we try. This is a world where we could fight for 100 years and never reach a conclusion . …There is still much to research about the absurd. After all, this has even twisted time and continuity."

"?"

"You still don't get it? The mechanical malfunctions that saved those nine from death were most likely brought on by the character you have been given. However, when did you acquire that character? As the dealer, I gained the Unbeatable Emperor only after sacrificing those nine to guide in the absurd. Your Ever-Victorious Challenger must be the same. …*And yet your power saved those nine.* You saved them using the character you obtained from their deaths. What can you

call that if not a contradiction? This is a power that can ignore time and continuity, so how are normal weapons like knives and bombs supposed to decide our victory?"

Higashikawa did not understand what was happening , but he began to wonder if the bunny girl did not have control of the situation.

The cat had been removed from the box and its state could not be explained.

It was truly absurd.

"Then what are we supposed to do?"

"This."

The bunny girl snapped her fingers.

Immediately afterwards, a change came over all of the laptops in the bar. White letters of the alphabet scrolled across the black screens at high speed. This was not simple English, so Higashikawa could not understand it.

"What are you doing?"

"Changing the settings of the facility's master key," said the bunny girl offhandedly with a single card in one hand. But what she said was very important. "This single card lets you unlock all the doors, view any files, switch on and off the traps, and control any device. It can drag those nine up with the spare machines or it can drop them into the acid."

The master key.

That would be the best item for rescuing the other nine and for escaping the facility.

"Why are you letting me see that?"

"Because it is necessary," readily replied the bunny girl. She moved in close enough that he could feel her breath on his face. "In the end, we are both supported by the gambling absurdities that control this field. Knives and guns have no meaning anymore. Those reasonable responses would be exterminated by the absurd. And thus we must compete according to the rules of the absurd. We must disturb these powers that call in success like the goddess of victory. That is the only way to rob the other of their power. Only once we do that can we kill each other."

"So are you suggesting betting that master key on an attraction?"

"More or less. If you win, only your red and black card will function as the master. If I have the master key, the nine of them will die. If you have the master key, I will lose my life and the organizers' project will be destroyed. It is only once we both put everything on the line that this attraction can overturn the absurd. This level of gamble is needed."

"What exactly is the attraction? Guessing the password ?"

"That would be meaningless. You have obtained the Ever-Victorious Challenger, so you would probably get it right just by randomly hitting the keys. *And so I have put together some more interesting questions.*"

"…"

It was undoubtedly going to be something horrible.

Higashikawa had learned all too well how cruel the bunny girl was during that attraction with the red and black cards.

It would be something far, far above the upper limit of his imagination.

Finally, the letters stopped scrolling across the many screens.

Instead of some strange program code, it now displayed proper Japanese text.

Higashikawa focused all of his attention on grasping what it said.

And…

"……
……
……
……Eh?"

As soon as he understood what it was he saw there, Higashikawa Mamoru's thoughts stopped completely.

Part 3

As Higashikawa stood motionlessly, he heard the bunny girl whispering in his ear.

She was so close he could smell the sweetness of her breath.

"This was originally set up on the facility's exit as the final challenge we could watch you suffer through."

The final challenge.

It was not proving some difficult problem that troubled mathematicians the world over and it was not an ancient piece of text that no linguist had been able to translate.

However…

In a way, this was a much more dreadful challenge for Higashikawa than some obviously difficult problem. It was a cliff. It was a precipice.

Higashikawa spoke aloud its name.

"The attraction monitoring we took part in…?"

" 'Attraction 01: Deadly Bullet Game', 'Attraction 02: Hide-and-Seek Gamble', 'Attraction 03: Bang, Bang, Bang !!', 'Attraction 04: Sudden Death Old Maid', 'Attraction 05: Loser Resurrection Game', 'Attraction 06: Grand Slam

Homer', 'Attraction 07: Memory Game', 'Attraction 08: Washing Away Blood with Blood', 'Attraction 09: Killing Someone by Solving a Mystery Not Involving a Murder', and 'Attraction 10: Earn 200,000 Yen with 1 Millimeter'. …Well, I'm sure you recognize all the names. However…"

The bunny girl smiled.

She smiled cruelly.

Her smile did not seem to simply contain evil; it seemed to symbolize evil itself.

"*This time, the rules in our archives have been updated. The deficiencies in the rules have been compensated for thanks to the monitor form you filled out.*"

It was budding.

Something pitch black and filled with cruelty was blooming.

On a personal level, this was the most difficult problem in the world.

"You must now give a strategy for the attractions you have completed yourself!! If you can get through all 10 attractions, you win. If you cannot come up with anything for even one, you lose. *See? It's just a simple monitoring, right!?"*

They might have answers.

There might be holes remaining.

But he had been the ones to close up the holes. This attraction used the answerer's own thought processes to seal up the holes the answerer would think up first.

Even if the questions could be answered easily with a third party's thought processes, the answerer himself could not use those.

In other words…

"The answerer has prepared his own personal dead end! Even as his life is on the line, he himself blocks his way as his most powerful enemy!! Really, don't you think these are the perfect kind of absurd questions for the situation!?"

Bringing out these questions almost assured a checkmate on her part.

It was like heading back into a maze one had already sealed the exit of.

However…

"If I clear this, I get the master key?"

"What?"

"I don't know what all this Unbeatable Emperor and Ever-Victorious Challenger nonsense is about, but those absurdities with embarrassing names will disappear and I'll be able to punch you right in the face, right?"

"Wait, you actually intend to answer them? But this attraction was made so your own thought patterns would lead you to surrender!"

"…"

Instead of answering, Higashikawa Mamoru turned toward a nearby laptop.

(You call this hard?)

He knew of a much, much harder problem. And he knew the people who had solved it. He had seen the answers given by those nine who had risked their lives to save his life in that attraction using red and black cards. They had not simply trusted Higashikawa. The entire group of ten had trusted the entire group of ten, and so they had played black so they could all survive.

Compared to that choice…

Compared to that answer…

He was not about to let these pathetic lines of text frighten him!

"This is the final challenge," decisively said Higashikawa Mamoru as he faced the laptop. "Prepare yourself. This will be the last attraction. I don't give a shit about the Unbeatable Emperor or the Ever-Victorious Challenger! I will destroy all of your plans here!!"

The final challenge is about to begin. Please prepare paper, a pen, and the answer sheet you made during the monitoring.

Final Challenge 01: Deadly Bullet Game

In this attraction, items with point values are used to defend against bullets fired from head on. What is a surefire method of clearing this attraction?

Point of Improvement 1 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 2 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 3 from Your Form: (

)

Your New Surefire Method:

(

)

Final Challenge 02: Hide-and-Seek Gamble

In this attraction, the participants are divided between hiders and seekers and play hide-and-seek for a set time. If a hider is photographed by one of the seekers' digital cameras, he is considered "caught". What is a surefire method of clearing this attraction from the standpoint of a hider?

Point of Improvement 1 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 2 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 3 from Your Form: (

)

Your New Surefire Method:

(

)

Final Challenge 03: Bang, Bang, Bang!!

In this attraction, five participants are handed five handguns. Each gun has only one bullet. They fight to the death and the last survivor wins. What is a surefire method of clearing this attraction?

Point of Improvement 1 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 2 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 3 from Your Form: (

)

Your New Surefire Method:

(

)

Final Challenge 04: Sudden Death Old Maid

In this attraction, a shuffled deck of cards is divided between Competitor A and Competitor B. Then they are each given 26 jokers. Competitors A and B must hold out a pair of cards and play old maid with them. The competitor with fewer jokers at the end wins. What is a surefire method of clearing this attraction?

Point of Improvement 1 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 2 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 3 from Your Form: (

)

Your New Surefire Method:

(

)

Final Challenge 05: Loser Resurrection Game

In this attraction, pairs are created. To win, one member of the pair must have their heart stopped and the other must breathe life back into them. What is a surefire method of clearing this attraction?

Point of Improvement 1 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 2 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 3 from Your Form: (

)

Your New Surefire Method:

(

)

Final Challenge 06: Grand Slam Homer

In this attraction, at least one home run must be hit from balls pitched by a cutting edge pitching machine in a domed stadium. The batter has 10 chances. What is a surefire method of clearing this attraction?

Point of Improvement 1 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 2 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 3 from Your Form: (

)

Your New Surefire Method:

(

)

Final Challenge 07: Memory Game

In this attraction, the participant is shown a video on a monitor, must answer quiz questions to pass through bars blocking their path, and must answer a memory-based question at the end. What is a surefire method of clearing this attraction?

Point of Improvement 1 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 2 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 3 from Your Form: (

)

Your New Surefire Method:

(

)

Final Challenge 08: Washing Away Blood with Blood

In this attraction, the participants kill each other using various weapons drawn by lots. What is a surefire method of clearing this attraction?

Point of Improvement 1 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 2 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 3 from Your Form: (

)

Your New Surefire Method:

(

)

Final Challenge 09: Killing Someone by Solving a Mystery Not Involving a Murder

In this attraction, the contestants must enter a 2 digit number and then use various question cards to hide their own number and work out the other's number. What is a surefire method of clearing this attraction?

Point of Improvement 1 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 2 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 3 from Your Form: (

)

Your New Surefire Method:

(

)

Final Challenge 10: Earn 200,000 Yen with 1 Millimeter

In this attraction, your own body is fixed into a guillotine. You must use buttons that drop and stop the blade to stop the blade at the very last second. What is a surefire method of clearing this attraction?

Point of Improvement 1 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 2 from Your Form: (

)

Point of Improvement 3 from Your Form: (

)

Your New Surefire Method:

(

)

Part 4

"……You're kidding."

The bunny girl muttered those words in shock.

She showed a look of amazement that had not been seen on her face before.

"But…you shouldn't be able to solve those. You shouldn't be able to solve them!! Those are the worst possible questions for the answerer because they used the answerer's own thought processes to seal up his personal loopholes!!"

"*The worst possible?*" Higashikawa Mamoru frowned doubtfully after he finished typing. "*You think that's the worst possible? This was nothing more than a simple monitoring.*"

"Oh, I see. It was *because* they were absolutely impossible to answer. That's why! That has to be it!! That brought the absurd into play, didn't it!? The power to make the impossible possible allowed you to answer those unanswerable questions!!"

"…"

Higashikawa Mamoru slowly shook his head.

He did not need any strange powers to solve something of this level.

It was just a matter of preconceptions.

The fixed idea that he could never solve it would restrict his thoughts. By resetting everything and rethinking from square one, he could find a way through .

This was just a game of creating a question and solving it oneself.

It had nothing but himself in it.

But Higashikawa knew of something else.

He knew of his nine comrades who had taken on the burden of others' lives and futures and shown him the way to the best answer.

When he thought of them…

When their lives hung in the balance…

He could no longer think of this as his own choice. It exceeded the boundaries of playing a game with himself and new pathways of thought opened up.

When someone falls in love, gets married, has a child, or takes on responsibility for anything important, their thought processes transform into something new. This was the same as that.

"I win."

"…"

"I win. It doesn't matter if you accept it or not. I won the final attraction. The master key I need to rescue those nine is mine. And more importantly, we no longer need to be bound by those ridiculous powers. Isn't that right?"

"Ha…ha ha," laughed the bunny girl.

It was not that she had stopped thinking out of fear or that she was laughing out of desperation.

Some decisive core remained. She had not broken yet.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

burden then caused the laptops to burst to pieces and send sparks flying everywhere.

"!?"

Higashikawa covered his face with his hands and the bunny girl was gone by the time he could see again. One door to the bar was suspiciously sitting open, but he did not know if she had actually escaped through it.

However, he held the key to the entire facility in his hand.

And he still had that unnatural power to call in success that apparently came from the absurd. If what the bunny girl had said was accurate, this power was on the level of the goddess of victory who caused conflicts among the gods because simply having her on your side would give you victory in a war.

If he tried to find her, he could find her right away.

If he tried to kill her, he could kill her right away.

"But more importantly…"

The nine dangling in the great pit below the floor came first.

Higashikawa thought all of the laptops had been destroyed, but when he looked around the area, he found one laptop that was conveniently unscathed.

He did not know if it had simply survived or if his power had overturned continuity once more.

Part 5

Higashikawa Mamoru was a complete amateur when it came to operating such specialized devices, but all it took was randomly hitting a few keys to safely draw up the bags the nine were trapped inside like a giant game of goldfish scooping. It all went unnaturally smoothly as if some invisible force was controlling it all, but he did not care at the moment.

“H-hey, what’s going on!? Weren’t we going to be killed!?” asked Kazakami in disbelief even as he broke through the thick plastic and crawled out.

“It felt like the process suddenly stopped partway through.”

Harumi and Rachel did not seem to understand what had happened either.

After helping Hiyama out of her thick plastic bag, the high school girl named Matsumi asked, “Where’s the bunny girl?”

Higashikawa replied, “She’s no longer a threat.”

With that said, Higashikawa and the other nine left the bar. They were supposedly in a vast sealed-off area prepared by the organizers with several layers of locks keeping them in, but Higashikawa had the master key. All the electronic locks were meaningless. He easily opened the hidden doors that were practically part of the wall, the traps and sensors set in the passageways were not active, and they made it to the exit with no trouble at all.

It was a small back door made of aluminum or stainless steel.

Given everything that had happened, Anzai was cautious.

“W-will it really be this easy?”

"After everything so far, I get the feeling they are having us let down our guard before sending in something huge."

Even Hotaru, who had given off a comparatively calm and collected impression, was overcome by suspicion.

But Higashikawa felt they had no reason to worry.

The issue had already been settled at the level of those strange absurdities. Higashikawa and the others were protected by rules of an insane world where people could not hurt each other even with shards from broken monitors, bombs, or knives. No matter what the bunny girl and the other organizers were plotting, Higashikawa doubted it would go as they expected.

And so…

He did not hesitate to grab the doorknob and turn it.

The door opened wide.

The first thing he noticed was the wind.

It was nothing more than the air of a moderately cool night flowing in. However, that wind tugged at all of

their heartstrings. This was not the stale air of that vast enclosed area. This was freely flowing wind. They were overcome with emotion when struck by this completely normal sensation.

It symbolized their freedom.

It proved they had escaped alive from those attractions .

“O-oh.”

Someone spoke.

It may not have mattered who it was.

All of them then cried out.

“Ooooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

They cried out, shouted out, and then scrambled to be the first one out the door. The door was small, so they were squeezing past each other to get through. They lost their balance and fell to the ground.

They tasted dirt.

Dirt.

This was not a floor. It was a flavor that could only come from the earth.

As he reflected on that flavor, Higashikawa's tear glands finally gave in.

"Ha ha ha!! We won… Dammit, we won!! Every single one of us escaped those insane attractions aliiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiivvvv

They just needed to escape. That would mean they had defeated the organizers.

The career woman named Hiyama stared down at Higashikawa's face.

"Excellent work."

"…We made it somehow. Almost everything was thought up at the last second, though."

"You could have abandoned us."

"That wouldn't have been a victory. After everything we went through, we had to win."

He grabbed her outstretched hand to stand up.

But then…

"…?"

When he placed his other hand against the ground to support himself, he felt something oddly hard. It almost felt like metal. Higashikawa brushed away the surface of the dirt and found something odd.

It was a handle.

He then uncovered a square frame two meters across.

“What is this?”

“It might lead to a basement,” whispered Hiyama.

Kazakami shook his head.

“Stop that. We got out. That’s all we need to do, right? If we leave and head back home, we can survive. We don ’t need to head further in!!”

“But will the organizers really just let us leave?” suggested Hotaru.

Aisu spoke up in agreement.

“They have our personal information. They won’t attack our homes later, will they?”

“…”

Rachel crouched down in fear.

Higashikawa honestly doubted the organizers could damage them now. He did not understand any of this absurdity or Ever-Victorious Challenger nonsense, but the power balance had already been made clear. Regardless of Higashikawa's own ability, the organizers would be automatically eliminated due to the power to call in success.

But would that power protect him forever?

He had no idea what rules it was based in or what fuel it consumed to function. It could be that once he left this place, once he woke up the next day, or once he had forgotten about it, he would suddenly find the power was gone and he was completely defenseless.

Had they truly ensured their safety?

Was it not better to approach the core of the organizers while he had this overwhelming power and could get away with a bit of risk?

With Anzai's help, Higashikawa opened the door in the ground. As expected, it contained concrete stairs leading underground. It was too dark inside to see what was there.

"Are the organizers in there?" asked Harumi.

"Who even are the organizers? It certainly sounded like there were more than just the bunny girl," said Kozue.

Higashikawa was just as curious.

For one thing, he still did not know why they had carried out these large-scale attractions. It seemed the bunny girl had achieved some sort of goal, but he did not know what that meant.

And…

If he could gain control of whatever that was, would he be able to use it as a powerful card in negotiations with the organizers?

"What should we do?" asked Anzai Kyousuke. "Will we continue on or escape outside?"

"…"

Higashikawa thought.

Having all ten of them leave together would likely be the greatest result. But any slight mistake would get them all killed.

On the other hand, the cornerstone of the organizers' plan might be right before his eyes. The thought of stealing it or destroying it was too much to pass up. Higashikawa and the others had been on the receiving end the entire time, and they finally had a real chance to fight back.

What would he do?

What would he choose?

After thinking for a while, he finally spoke.

"I'll go. If there are any traps, it's better if only one person is caught in them."

Higashikawa and the other nine had defeated the organizers. They had all survived the attractions.

But the one who had won under a special set of rules and had gained the most from his victory was clearly Higashikawa. The one to set foot in the most dangerous

place had to be the one who had obtained the Ever-Victorious Challenger.

Anzai asked, “Are you sure?”

“If we overlook this here, it could come back to bite us in the ass. I will find something we can use to ensure we will not be attacked again after escaping. That is the best possible ending.”

Having said that, Higashikawa looked down at the staircase.

Hiyama spoke from behind him.

“If anything happens, just shout for help.”

“I will.”

He took the first step.

After feeling the hard concrete underfoot, he continued down into the darkness belowground.

He was greatly reminded of the abyss of hell.

Before long, the pale starlight could no longer reach him. It was pitch black by the time he reached the bottom of the staircase. He felt his way along and found a metal door in front of him.

He turned the knob.

It did not seem to be locked.

"…"

And then…

Higashikawa Mamoru…

…opened the door.

Part 6

The room was dimly lit.

But compared to that the complete darkness from before, this was quite a bit more light.

The small square room was about the size of a school classroom. About 50 folding chairs were lined up evenly

within. A film projector was located against the right wall and a pure white screen hung down on the left wall. The room's light came from the film being shown.

The screen showed Higashikawa, Hiyama, and the others.

A compilation of footage from their struggles in the Hell Hospital was being carelessly shown.

About 30 of the 50 folding chairs were filled. The people sitting in them were mostly middle-aged or elderly and did not look like they had struggled a day in their lives. They did not even turn in Higashikawa's direction when he suddenly entered the room. He could see the sides of their faces dimly illuminated by the light of the projector. They were all smiling. That unity lacked any humanity. Higashikawa could feel a sense of revulsion run from his fingertips and across his body like when seeing a swarm of insects.

Higashikawa felt an uncontrollable heat in his head when he spotted the bunny girl among them.

"You bitch!!" he shouted and ran over to grab her shoulder.

But then…

Amid all of the unmoving people, the bunny girl alone turned just her head in Higashikawa's direction.

Yes, just her head.

There was nothing but her shapely face and spine.

Her smile bloomed on her face like she was some horrifying flower in a vase.

"…Eh?"

Higashikawa's vision grew psychedelically distorted.

His brain refused to comprehend what he was seeing.

From her neck up, her bright skin and wonderful complexion remained unchanged, but below her neck was nothing but a white backbone. And some sticky, flesh-colored liquid had spread out across the folding chair and the floor around it. That was all. What looked to be her clothes had fallen away with the liquid.

That was truly all.

She could not be alive any longer.

Even if she could change her expression and carry a conversation, something about her was definitively different from a living human. She had become something on the level of a character from a story where a head blinked after being removed by a guillotine.

"What…?"

His question was simply about what had happened to the bunny girl.

But…

Could it be?

He turned toward the middle-age and elderly people who were not moving no matter what.

Were they the same?

"Our…"

The bunny girl's coquettishly glittering lips moved.

Given the state she was in, it seemed horribly wrong for the bunny girl to still be alive and still smiling as always.

"Our objective was to capture the absurd. We were to call in Objective Alice who symbolizes the absurd and capture her."

"What…?"

"The gambling storyline as well as the Unbeatable Emperor and Ever-Victorious Challenger characters gained from it were nothing more than side effects. We had no interest in the gambling story itself. Our objective was to capture the special girl who can be called the guide for all storylines, be they horror, gambling, love comedy, suspense, action, battle, sports, science fiction, or fantasy. Of all the countless storylines derived from the guide, the gambling one was the easiest to use. We tried to work our way back from there to approach Alice, the guide. …*That* is what this story really is."

At first, it seemed she was explaining it to him, but she was not checking to see if he understood. It was as if she was a digital recorder spouting back predetermined information.

"You may not believe it, but we are an ideological association that stands on the side of justice. To be blunt, this is a great problem that cannot be resolved by any honest means, so we have been constantly working towards resolving it all at once using dishonest means."

The absurd.

Objective Alice.

Higashikawa had no idea what those terms referred to, so he had no way of understanding what the rest of the explanation meant. However, the bunny girl omitted any explanations regarding them to an unnatural extent.

It was as if someone had edited out the information he must not hear.

"The absurd is an existence that disturbs the proper parameters of things. If used well, we thought it could lead us to the answers to all sorts of problems without having to find a real solution. We thought it could be used like a book of prophecy."

The bunny girl gave an oddly vivid smile.

Higashikawa could not tell what emotion was contained within it.

He was not even sure if anything remained of the bunny girl's will.

"But when we attempted it, this is what happened. It seems we angered Alice in the process of our emulation. She used her full ability to protect you or someone in your group."

The cause of this insane phenomenon.

An existence that had so easily wiped out the organizers of those attractions.

An overwhelming character that held far greater power than Higashikawa's unnatural ability to call in success.

The strange guide who smiled as she tied together the stories of an omnibus horror movie and stood above the evil spirits and monsters that did as they pleased in the stories.

"But this is a new discovery." The bunny girl's expression was one of true joy. "After all, we now know

Objective Alice can feel honest anger based in an honest moral framework. That means provoking her that way could eliminate the need for an emulation based in detailed formulas and-…"

The bunny girl's words suddenly came to an end.

Her beautiful eyes rotated to an odd angle.

Higashikawa heard a splashing noise.

That single flower that had just barely remained intact had finally turned to a flesh-colored liquid and splattered to the floor.

At the same moment, all of the middle-aged and elderly people left in the other chairs melted to the floor as well. It sounded like bucket after bucket of water was being poured to the ground.

It was like a switch had been thrown.

It looked as if a lawnmower had made its way through that creepy flower garden.

They had been absurdly left alive until then just to tell Higashikawa those words.

"…"

Higashikawa felt confused that he was still breathing.

That was how removed from reality it all felt.

He audibly gulped and finally truly felt that he was still alive. He finally came to a conclusion.

(The organizers are gone. We should be safe for now.)

But as soon as he thought that, he heard a small noise.

He had not noticed it before and it seemed strange that he had not, but the room had another door. The lock clicked open and the door cracked open on its own.

He could not see anything through the gap.

It was possible something was peering out at him.

But the organizers were gone.

Higashikawa had concluded that.

In that case…

Who was beyond that door?

Who was left?

"…You're kidding."

If what the bunny girl – or whoever had been making her speak – was right, Objective Alice had given this cruel punishment to the organizers in order to save Higashikawa and the others.

And now something else was inviting him into that extraordinarily deep darkness.

Were they trying to save him? Or did they have some other objective?

None of it fit together and everyone's intentions seemed scattered everywhere.

It brought a certain word to Higashikawa's mind:

Absurd.

"…"

If he turned back toward the staircase to the surface, he could likely ignorantly meet up with the other nine and safely return home.

But if he headed further into the darkness, he could arrive at the truth in exchange for a fair amount of risk. But this risk would surely be more than he could handle with a puny absurdity like the Ever-Victorious Challenger.

Sweat poured from Higashikawa's brow and he felt it drip down along his nose.

Which path should he choose?

And finally…

He chose.

Report on Methods of Using the Absurd

The existence known as Objective Alice can freely distort any of the parameters based in normal physical laws. In a way, she is a symbol of calamity, and in a different way, she is a symbol of fortune and success.

Think of her as something like the philosopher's stone whispered of in the Middle Ages.

Not only can she transform lead into pure gold, but she can change high density nuclear waste into safe platinum.

She is an existence that infinitely takes in any and all laws and then twists and distorts them.

She is also referred to as the "guide", but her true essence may be closer to something like a black hole to the core structures of this world.

When researching means of applying Objective Alice, great care must be taken to construct safety measures to prevent oneself from being sucked into the countless absurd stories that develop around her.

To be blunt, there is no definite method of doing this.

Objective Alice is defined as an existence that distorts any definite rules, so even if you construct a definite method, that very truth may alter Objective Alice's existence and provide an update that eliminates that weakness.

We will prepare a number of the absurd stories Objective Alice is meant to scatter. That will guide her to a designated location. That is likely the most important point in this emulation project.

If we are accepted into Objective Alice, we will become the rulers of the entire world. However, if she rejects us and the absurd bares its fangs, we will likely disappear from history. We will be like a side character eliminated in the changes made to history with a time machine.

The result of the formulas we used shows that our methods must be quite cruel, so we simply must hope that Objective Alice is not a reasonable enough existence to feel honest anger upon seeing this sort of violence.

Now then…

Will we receive fortune or misfortune? The time to test ourselves has arrived.

The Unrecorded Result

There was a white girl.

She had long white hair, she had skin so white it looked transparent, and she wore a white dress made of an unknown material.

This girl who was dyed completely in white was collapsed face down on the ground.

Another girl stood next to her.

This other girl was just as white. She looked down at the collapsed girl with an unimpressed look. She lifted up one slender leg.

She then casually crushed the head of the girl with an identical face underfoot.

Immediately afterwards, a change came over the girl on the ground. It started from the center of her crushed head. Her white hair, her almost transparent skin, her dress made of an unknown material, and everything else all transformed into countless pages of reports.

The wind picked them up and the hundreds, thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of papers scattered into the darkness. Progress Report #201. From the Items Left Behind by a Dead Freelance Writer. Records of Player 2's Actions. What Each Person Held. Report on Methods of Using the Absurd. The other girl grabbed one paper between two fingers.

She glanced at the report and gave a light sigh.

She let go and that paper seemed to dissolve into the darkness as it was blown away by the wind as well.

The remaining girl was not concerned with where all those papers had gone.

She quietly spoke in a disinterested tone.

"Phenomena that can be explained in words cannot be described as absurd."

With all of the report pages having blown away and disappeared, the girl began walking. She was surrounded by darkness in every direction. She walked through that scenery that looked as if it could lead anywhere and like it led nowhere.

"Isn't that right, Emulator?"

This girl who had eliminated the existence known as Objective Alice disappeared into the darkness.

For just an instant, the hem of her dress came apart absurdly and what looked like countless reels of film spread out.

Afterword

Tah dah! The unexpected second volume.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

The theme this time was life-or-death gambles. I think the color has changed quite a bit compared to A Simple Survey, but "she" is still involved at the core of the story …or so it seemed. The very, very end gives a different ending, so be careful. If you carelessly overlook it, you might incorrectly think the girl from the previous novel was behind all this.

In the A Simple series, most of the explanation and information given by the characters is wrong, but the true setting begins to show itself if you compare what the different characters say. It's a bit of a special story structure. When it comes to portraying "her" at the core of the story, I have tried to emphasize a feeling of things being left unexplained since anyone giving a plain and direct explanation would end up dead.

For example, take the voice mail message that suddenly appeared in the middle of the story. Be careful about directly making the simple assumption that it was

left on the cell phone of second half's protagonist, Higashikawa. Well, if you read the previous novel, you should be able to make a good guess at who made it and who it was meant for. However, there is actually one more trap set up on top of that. You should be able to figure it out if you read this novel to the very, very end and then compare the speech patterns.[1]

Also, in the second half of this novel, I intentionally altered the "speed" of the story in a few places. For example, when Higashikawa was persuading Rachel through the door or the final exchange with the bunny girl. I was trying to give an impression of the formless absurd slowly and silently approaching. How do you think I did?

I'm a bit worried that the reader participation gimmick was too complex and involved compared to the one in A Simple Survey.

I prepared that sort of gimmick because I really wanted to get across the absurd turn of events of having your own choices block your path as your greatest enemy.

…By the way, did you clear that final rush of questions without getting killed?

I give my thanks to my illustrator Kasai Shin-san, my editor Miki-san, and all of the readers.

This series has now handled love comedy and gambling. I thank you for sticking with me this far. I can't imagine when another novel in this series would come out, but I do hope I can eventually write one.

Not explaining things really is a special sort of story structure.

-Kamachi Kazuma

Notes

1. ↑ The girl leaving the message used "konata" as a first person pronoun. See Harumi's Case from A Simple Survey for why that is important.